

ACCORDING TO SEASON



Mrs. William Starr Dana

WITH 16 ORIGINAL COLOR PLATES BY

Elsie Louise Shaw

1894 (rev. 1902 ed.)



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BOSTON

1990

INTRODUCTORY

Self-sown my stately garden grows;
The winds and wind-blown seed,
Cold April rain and colder snows
My hedges plant and feed.

From mountains far and valleys near
The harvests sown to-day
Thrive in all weathers without fear,—
Wild planters, plant away!

— EMERSON

Behold there in the woods the fine madman . . .
he accosts the grass and the trees; he feels the
blood of the violet, the clover, and the lily in
his veins; and he talks with the brook that wets
his foot.

— EMERSON

creasing class there are many, undoubtedly, who "having eyes to see, see not," even among sights sufficiently fraught with interest, one would suppose, to awaken the curiosity of the dullest, yet there are others, many others, who can cry with Mr. Norman Gale,

"And oh, my heart has understood
The spider's fragile line of lace,
The common weed, the woody space!"

who are quick to detect each bird-song, and eager to trace it to its source; who follow curiously the tiny tracks of the wood creatures; who note the varied outlines of the forest leaves, and discover the smallest of the flowers that grow beneath them.

If we do not happen ourselves to be blessed with a natural turn for observation, a little companionship with one of these more fortunate beings will persuade us, I think, that the habit is one which it would be both possible and desirable to cultivate. It had never occurred to me, for example, that it would be worth while to look for wild flowers on Fifth Avenue, until a certain morning when a keen-eyed botanical companion stooped and plucked from an earth-filled chink in its pavement, a little blossom which had found its way hither from some country lane. Since then I have tried to keep my wits about me even on that highway of the Philistines.

THAT WE KNOW so little, as a people, of our birds, trees, rocks, and flowers, is not due, I think, so much to any inborn lack of appreciation of the beautiful or interesting, as to the fact that we have been obliged to concentrate our energies in those directions which seemed to lead to some immediate material advantage, leaving us little time to expend upon the study of such objects as promised to yield no tangible remuneration. Then, too, our struggle for existence has taken place largely in towns, where there is almost nothing to awaken any dormant love of nature. But, little by little, we are changing all that. Each year a larger portion of our city population is able to seek the refreshment and inspiration of the country during those months when it is almost, if not quite, at its loveliest. And while among this constantly in-

We are prone, most of us, to be inaccurate as well as unobservant; and I know of no better antidote to inaccuracy than a faithful study of plants. It is sometimes difficult for the flower-lover to control his impatience when he hears his favorites recklessly miscalled; and in this improving exercise he has ample opportunity to become proficient, for many people cling with peculiar tenacity and unreasonableness to their first erroneous impression of a flower's name. They consider anything so vague and poetic fair game for their ready imaginations, glibly tacking the name of one flower to another with inconsequential light-heartedness. Occasionally they have been really misled by some similarity of sound. Such was the case of an acquaintance of mine who persisted in informing the various companions of his rambles that the little pink-flowered shrub which blossoms in June on our wooded hill-sides was the sheep-sorrel; and refused to be persuaded that the correct title was sheep-laurel. His ear had caught the words incorrectly; but although this explanation was suggested, supplemented by the arguments that the laurel-like look of the flowers at once betrayed their lineage, and that the sheep-sorrel was the plant with halberd-shaped leaves and tiny clustered flowers which in spring tinged with red the grassy uplands, he would only reply with dignified decision that his conviction was based on trustworthy authority. So, perhaps, in at least one

small circle, sheep-laurel is sheep-sorrel to this day.

But the uninitiated probably allow their imaginations to run more rife with the orchids than with any other flowers. Usually they are quite positive as to the general correctness of their conception of an orchid, and unless you are prepared to be made the object of a very genuine aversion, you will beware of trying to convince them of the error of their ways. In response to any such attempt they will defiantly challenge you: "Well, then, what is an orchid?" and woe betide you if you cannot couch your reply in half a dozen words of picturesque and unmis-takable description. The term orchid is dear to their hearts. Whenever they discover a rare and striking flower they like to grace it with the title, and are sure to bear you a grudge for depriving them of the pleasurable power of conferring this mark of floral knighthood at will. Last year a friend of mine happened for the first time upon the lovely fringed polygala. Her delight in its butterfly beauty was unbounded. Having learned its name and studied its odd form she turned appealingly to me: "Could you ever call it an orchid?" she asked; and I was unpleasantly conscious of my apparent churlishness in refusing to ennoble, even temporarily, so exquisite a creation.

"I like flowers, but I hate to pull them to pieces," is the cry of the lazy nature-lover. Surely if we like a thing we wish to know something about it, to enjoy some intimacy with it, to learn its secrets. Who actually cares most for flowers, the man who glances admiringly at them and turns away, or he who studies their structure, inquires into the function of each part, reads the meaning of their marvellous coloring, and translates the invitation expressed by their fragrance? I doubt if he who has never been so brutal as "to pull a flower to pieces," even dimly understands all the strange, sweet joy of a wood walk, when we are tempted eagerly — almost breathlessly — but always reverently, with the reverence that is born of even the beginnings of knowledge, and by so much superior to that which springs from ignorance, to turn the pages and decipher what we can

"In nature's infinite book of secrecy."

When we learn to call the flowers by name we take the first step toward a real intimacy with them. An eager sportsman who had always noticed and wondered about the plants which he met on every fishing expedition, wrote to me a few weeks since that hitherto he had felt toward them as the charity-boy did about the alphabet, "he knew the little beggars by sight, but he couldn't

tell their names"! And it has seemed as though a series of papers describing the different flowers to be found in the woods and fields, and by the roadsides, during the months suggested in their titles, might not only be helpful to those who care to "tell their names," but might increase the actual number of plants discovered, as one is far more likely to be successful in his search if he have a definite conception of what he can reasonably hope to find.

Wild Animals Have Known

and zoo Drawings

by

Ernest Thompson Seton



NATURALIST TO THE GOVERNMENT OF ILLINOIS
 BIRDS OF ILLINOIS
 ANIMALS OF ILLINOIS
 ART ANATOMY OF ANIMALS
 TRAIL OF THE SANDHILL STING
 BIOGRAPHY OF A GRIZZLY
 LIVES OF THE HUNTED

1898



Penguin Books - 1987

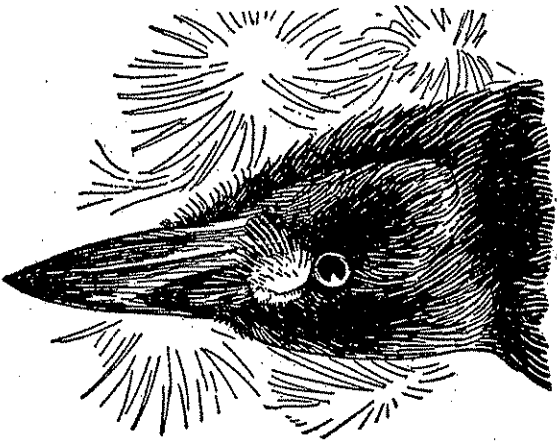
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HOW many of us have ever got to know a wild animal? I do not mean merely to meet with one once or twice, or to have one in a cage, but to really know it for a long time while it is wild, and to get an insight into its life and history. The trouble usually is to know one creature from his fellow. One fox or crow is so much like another that we cannot be sure that it really is the same next time we meet. But once in a while there arises an animal who is stronger or wiser than his fellow, who becomes a great leader, who is, as we would say, a genius, and if he is bigger,



I

Silverspot
 The Story of a Crow



Silverspot.

or has some mark by which men can know him, soon becomes famous in his country, and shows us that the life of a wild animal may be far more interesting and exciting than that of many human beings.

Of this class were Courant, the bob-tailed wolf that terrorized the whole city of Paris for about ten years in the beginning of the fourteenth century; Clubfoot, the lame grizzly bear that left such a terrific record in the San Joaquin Valley of California; Lobo, the King-wolf of New Mexico, that killed a cow every day for five years, and the Seonee panther that in less than two years killed nearly three hundred human beings—and such also was Silverspot, whose history, so far as I could learn it, I shall now briefly tell.

Silverspot was simply a wise old crow; his name was given because of the silvery white spot that was like a nickel, stuck on his right side, between the eye and the bill, and it was owing to this spot that I was able to know him from the other crows, and put together the parts of his history that came to my knowledge.

Crows are, as you must know, our most intelligent birds—Wise as an old crow' did not become a saying without good reason. Crows know the value of organization, and are as well drilled as soldiers—very much better than some soldiers, in fact, for crows are always on duty, always at war, and always dependent on each other for life and safety. Their leaders not only are the oldest and wisest of the band, but also the strongest and bravest, for they must be ready at any time with sheer force to put down an upstart or a rebel. The rank and file are the youngsters and the crows without special gifts.

Old Silverspot was the leader of a large band of crows that made their headquarters near Toronto, Canada, in Castle Frank, which is a pine-clad hill on the northeast edge of the city. This band numbered about two hundred, and for reasons that I never understood did not increase. In mild winters they stayed along the Niagara River; in cold winters they went much farther south. But each year in the last week of February Old Silverspot would muster his followers and boldly cross the forty miles of

open water that lies between Toronto and Niagara; not, however, in a straight line would he go, but always in a curve to the west, whereby he kept in sight of the familiar landmark of Dundas Mountain, until the pine-clad hill itself came in view. Each year he came with his troop, and for about six weeks took up his abode on the hill. Each morning thereafter the crows set out in three bands to forage. One band went southeast to Ashbridge's Bay. One went north up the Don, and one, the largest, went northwestward up the ravine. The last Silverspot led in person. Who led the others I never found out.

On calm mornings they flew high and straight away. But when it was windy the band flew low, and followed the ravine for shelter. My windows overlooked the ravine, and it was thus that in 1885 I first noticed this old crow. I was a new-comer in the neighborhood, but an old resident said to me then "that there old crow has been a-flying up and down this ravine for more than twenty years." My chances to watch were in the ravine, and Silverspot doggedly clinging to the old route, though now it

was edged with houses and spanned by bridges, became a very familiar acquaintance. Twice each day in March and part of April, then again in the late summer and the fall, he passed and repassed, and gave me chances to see his movements, and hear his orders to his bands, and so, little by little, opened my eyes to the fact that the crows, though a little people, are of great wit, a race of birds with a language and a social system that is wonderfully human in many of its chief points, and in some is better carried out than our own.

No. 1.
Caw Caw

tented, *All's well, come right along!* as we

should say, or as he put it, and as also his lieutenant echoed it at the rear of the band. They were flying very low to be out of the wind, and

Silverspot
 took with me a gun, and at once he cried out, 'Great danger—a gun.' His lieutenant re-



ca ca ca ca Caw

peated the cry, and every crow in the troop began to tower and scatter from the rest, till they were far above gun shot, and so passed safely over, coming down again to the shelter of the valley when well beyond reach. Another time, as the long, straggling troop came down the valley, a red-tailed hawk alighted on a tree close by their intended route. The leader cried out, 'Hawk, hawk,' and stayed



Caw Caw

his flight, as did each crow on nearing him, until all were massed in a solid body. Then, no longer fearing the hawk, they passed on. But a quarter of a mile farther on a man with a gun appeared below, and the cry, 'Great



Early in April there began to be great doings among the crows. Some new cause of excitement seemed to have come on them. They spent half the day among the pines, instead of foraging from dawn till dark. Pairs and trios might be seen chasing each other, and from time to time they showed off in various feats of flight. A favorite sport was to dart down suddenly from a great height toward some perching crow, and just before touching it to turn at a hairbreadth and rebound in the air so fast that the wings of the swooper whirred with a sound like distant thunder. Sometimes one crow would lower his head, raise every feather, and coming close to another would gurgle out a long note like



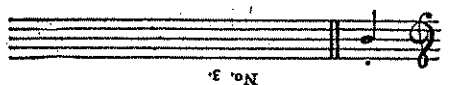
No. 10

Silverspot
 would have to rise a little to clear the bridge on which I was. Silverspot saw me standing there, and as I was closely watching him he didn't like it. He checked his flight and called out, 'Be on your guard,' or



Caw

and rose much higher in the air. Then seeing that I was not armed he flew over my head about twenty feet, and his followers in turn did the same, dipping again to the old level when past the bridge. Next day I was at the same place, and as the crows came near I raised my walking stick and pointed it at them. The old fellow at once cried out 'Danger,' and rose fifty feet higher



Ca

than before. Seeing that it was not a gun, he ventured to fly over. But on the third day I

danger—a gun, scatter for your lives, at once caused them to scatter widely and tower



ca ca ca ca Caw

till far beyond range. Many others of his words of command I learned in the course of my long acquaintance, and found that sometimes a very little difference in the sound makes a very great difference in meaning. Thus while No. 5 means hawk, or any large, dangerous bird, this means 'wheel around,' evidently a

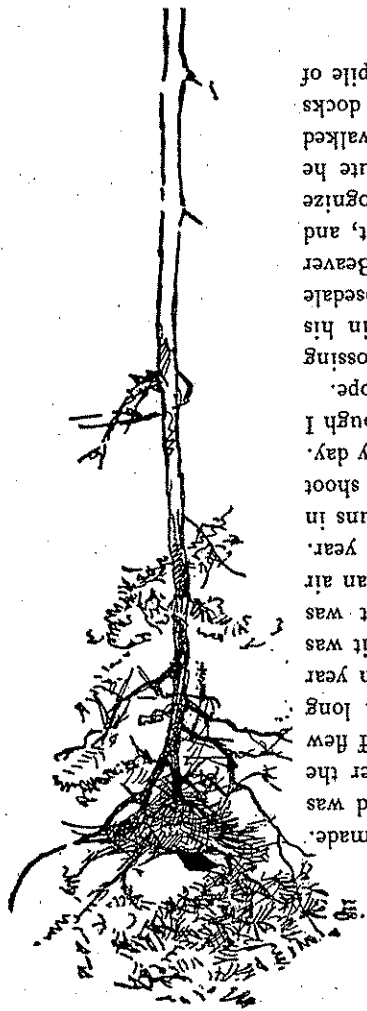


Caw Caw ca ca ca ca

combination of No. 5, whose root idea is danger, and of No. 4, whose root idea is retreat, and this again is a mere 'good day,' to a far away

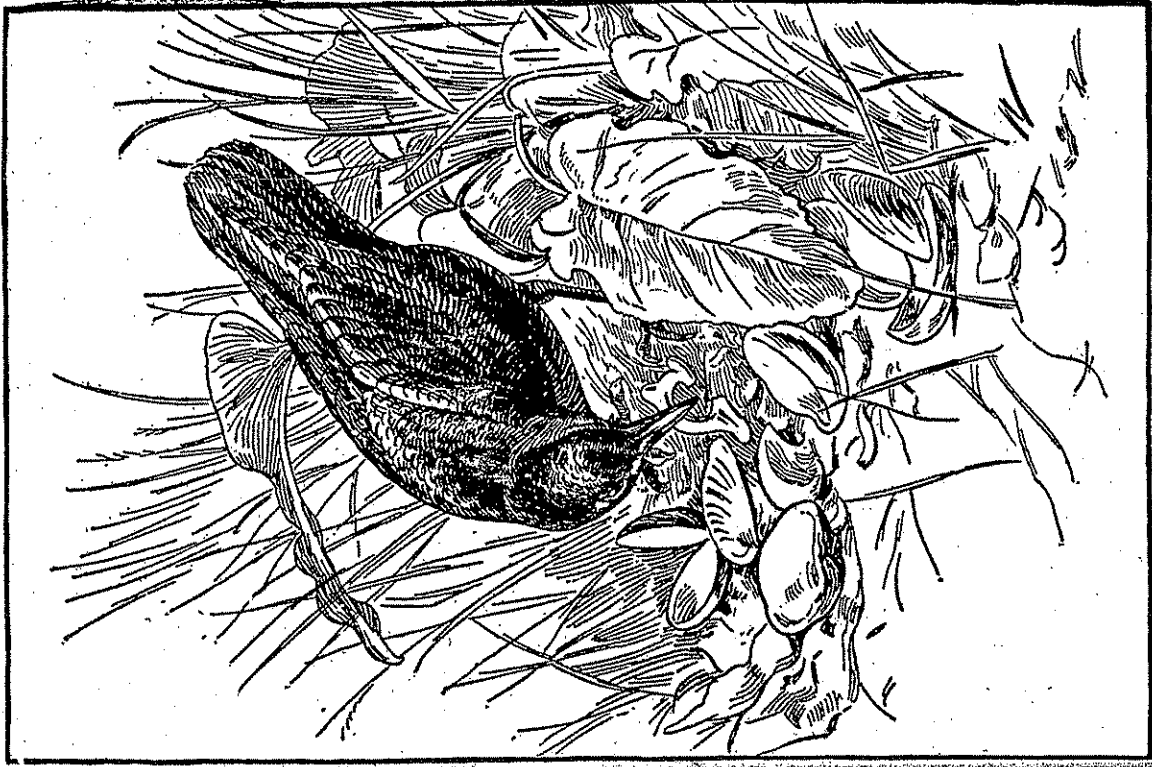


Caw Caw



Silverspot

dead leaves were so wet that no rustle was made. I chanced to pass under the old nest, and was surprised to see a black tail sticking over the edge. I struck the tree a smart blow, off flew a crow, and the secret was out. I had long suspected that a pair of crows nested each year about the pines, but now I realized that it was Silverspot and his wife. The old nest was theirs, and they were too wise to give it an air of spring-cleaning and housekeeping each year. Here they had nested for long, though guns in the hands of men and boys hungry to shoot crows were carried under their home every day. I never surprised the old fellow again, though I several times saw him through my telescope. One day while watching I saw a crow crossing the Don Valley with something white in his beak. He flew to the mouth of the Rosedale Brook, then took a short flight to the Beaver Elm. There he dropped the white object, and looking about gave me a chance to recognize my old friend Silverspot. After a minute he picked up the white thing—a shell—and walked over past the spring, and here, among the docks and the skunk-cabbages, he unearthed a pile of



The handle of a china-cup, the gem of the collection.

and stealing gently through the woods, whose One morning in May I was out at gray dawn, like other old nests.

tell, in all that time it never did drop to pieces, and old, and falling to pieces. Yet, strange to about it. There it was year after year, ragged on its edge, no one had ever seen a sign of life excepting that I had once shot a black squirrel Every Toronto school-boy knows the nest, and, pine-tree in whose top is a deserted hawk's nest. off. In the woods, between the two hills, is a Valley. It is still covered with woods that join with those of Castle Frank, a quarter of a mile The Sugar Loaf hill stands alone in the Don

II

What did it all mean? I soon learned. They were making love and pairing off. The males were showing off their wing powers and their voices to the lady crows. And they must have been highly appreciated, for by the middle of April all had mated and had scattered over the country for their honeymoon, leaving the some old pines of Castle Frank deserted and silent.

Silverspot

shells and other white, shiny things. He spread them out in the sun, turned them over, lifted them one by one in his beak, dropped them, nestled on them as though they were eggs, toyed with them and gloated over them like a miser. This was his hobby, his weakness. He could not have explained *why* he enjoyed them, any more than a boy can explain why he collects postage-stamps, or a girl why she prefers pearls to rubies; but his pleasure in them was very real, and after half an hour he covered them all, including the new one, with earth and leaves, and flew off. I went at once to the spot and examined the hoard; there was about a hatful in all, chiefly white pebbles, clam-shells, and some bits of tin, but there was also the handle of a china-up, which must have been the gem of the collection. That was the last time I saw them. Silverspot knew that I had found his treasures, and he removed them at once; where I never knew.

During the space that I watched him so closely he had many little adventures and escapes. He was once severely handled by a sparrowhawk, and often he was chased and

onward by the current, he seized and bore it off in triumph.

Silverspot was a crow of the world. He was truly a successful crow. He lived in a region that, though full of dangers, abounded with food. In the old, unrepaired nest he raised a brood each year with his wife, whom, by the way, I never could distinguish, and when the crows again gathered together he was their acknowledged chief.

The reassembling takes place about the end of June—the young crows with their bob-tails, soft wings, and falsetto voices are brought by their parents, whom they nearly equal in size, and introduced to society at the old pine woods, a woods that is at once their fortress and college. Here they find security in numbers and in lofty yet sheltered perches, and here they begin their schooling and are taught all the secrets of success in crow life, and in crow life the least failure does not simply mean begin again. It means *death*.

The first week or two after their arrival is spent by the young ones in getting acquainted, for each crow must know personally all the

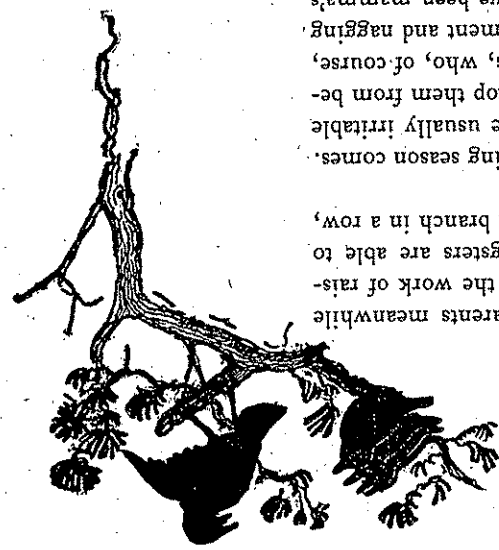
worried by kingbirds. Not that these did him much harm, but they were such noisy pests that he avoided their company as quickly as possible, just as a grown man avoids a conflict with a noisy and impudent small boy. He had some cruel tricks, too. He had a way of going the round of the small birds' nests each morning to eat the new laid eggs, as regularly as a doctor visiting his patients. But we must not judge him for that, as it is just what we ourselves do to the hens in the barn-yard.

His quickness of wit was often shown. One day I saw him flying down the ravine with a large piece of bread in his bill. The stream below him was at this time being bricked over as a sewer. There was one part of two hundred yards quite finished, and, as he flew over the open water just above this, the bread fell from his bill, and was swept by the current out of sight into the tunnel. He flew down and peered vainly into the dark cavern, then, acting upon a happy thought, he flew to the downstream end of the tunnel, and awaiting the reappearance of the floating bread, as it was swept

others in the band. Their parents meanwhile have time to rest a little after the work of raising them, for now the youngsters are able to feed themselves and roost on a branch in a row, just like big folks.

In a week or two the moulting season comes. At this time the old crows are usually irritable and nervous, but it does not stop them from beginning to drill the youngsters, who, of course, do not much enjoy the punishment and nagging they get so soon after they have been mamma's own darlings. But it is all for their good, as the old lady said when she skinned the cels, and old Silverspot is an excellent teacher. Sometimes he seems to make a speech to them. What he says I cannot guess, but, judging by the way they receive it, it must be extremely witty. Each morning there is a company of two or three squads according to their age and strength. The rest of the day they forage with their parents.

When at length September comes we find a great change. The rabble of silly little crows have begun to learn sense. The delicate blue

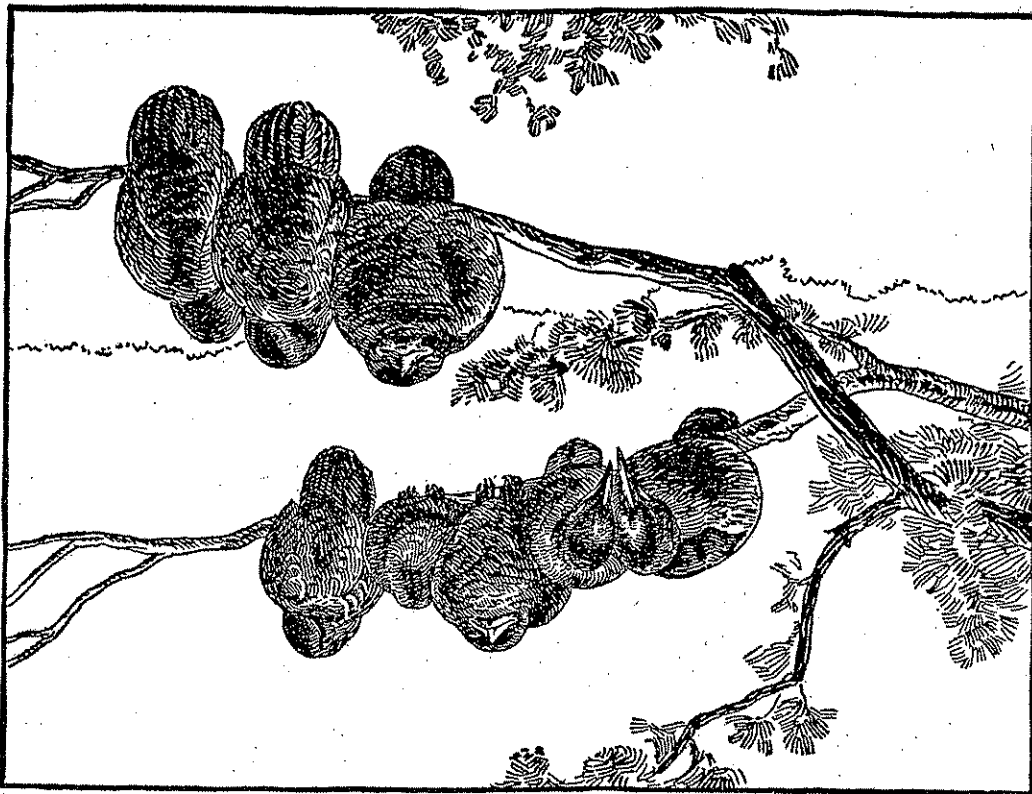




no lessons in egg-hunting yet, for it not the season. They are unacquainted with clams, and have never tasted horses' eyes, or seen sprouted corn, and they don't know a thing about travel, the greatest educator of all. They did not think of that two months ago, and since then they have thought of it, but have learned to wait till their betters are ready. September sees a great change in the old crows, too. Their moulting is over. They are now in full feather again and proud of their handsome coats. Their health is again good, and with it their tempers are improved. Even old Silverspot, the strict teacher, becomes quite jolly, and the youngsters, who have long ago learned to respect him, begin really to love him. He has hammered away at drill, teaching them all the signals and words of command in use, and now it is a pleasure to see them in the early morning. 'Company II' the old chieftain would cry in crow, and Company I would answer with a great clamor. 'Fly!' and himself leading them, they would all fly straight forward.

Silverspot

Roost in a row, like big folks.



iris of their eyes, the sign of a fool-crow, has given place to the dark brown eye of the old stager. They know their drill now and have learned sentry duty. They have been taught guns and traps and taken a special course in wire-worms and green-corn. They know that a fat old farmer's wife is much less dangerous, though so much larger, than her fifteen-year-old son, and they can tell the boy from his sister. They know that an umbrella is not a gun, and they can count up to six, which is fair for young crows, though Silverspot can go up nearly to thirty. They know the smell of gun-powder and the south side of a hemlock-tree, and begin to plume themselves upon being crows of the world. They always fold their wings three times after alighting, to be sure that it is neatly done. They know how to worry a fox into giving up half his dinner, and also that when the kingbird or the purple martin assails them they must dash into a bush, for it is as impossible to fight the little pests as it is for the fat apple-woman to catch the small boys who have raided her basket. All these things do the young crows know, but they have taken

Silverspot



us, but it works well and the crow organization is admitted by all birds to be the very best in existence.

Finally, each November sees the troop sail away southward to learn new modes of life, new landmarks and new kinds of food, under the guidance of the ever-wise Silverspot.

III

There is only one time when a crow is a fool, and that is at night. There is only one bird that terrifies the crow, and that is the owl. When, therefore, these come together it is a woeful thing for the sable birds. The distant hoot of an owl after dark is enough to make them withdraw their heads from under their wings, and sit trembling and miserable till morning. In very cold weather the exposure of their faces thus has often resulted in a crow having one or both of his eyes frozen, so that blindness followed and therefore death. There are no hospitals for sick crows.

'Mount!' and straight upward they turned in a moment.

'Bunch!' and they all massed into a dense black flock.

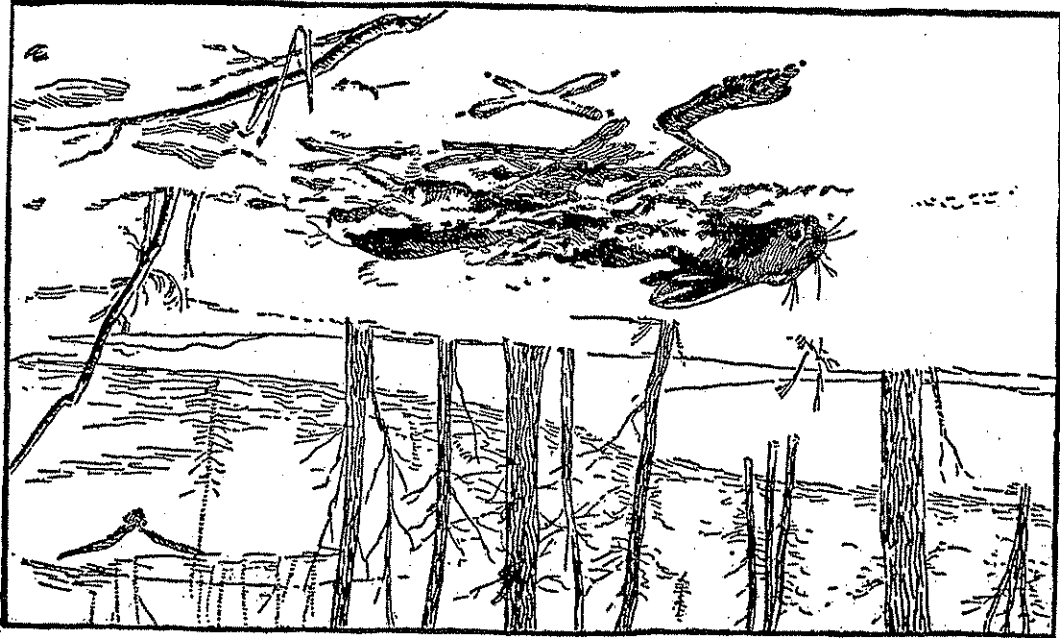
'Scatter!' and they spread out like leaves before the wind.

'Form line!' and they strung out into the long line of ordinary flight.

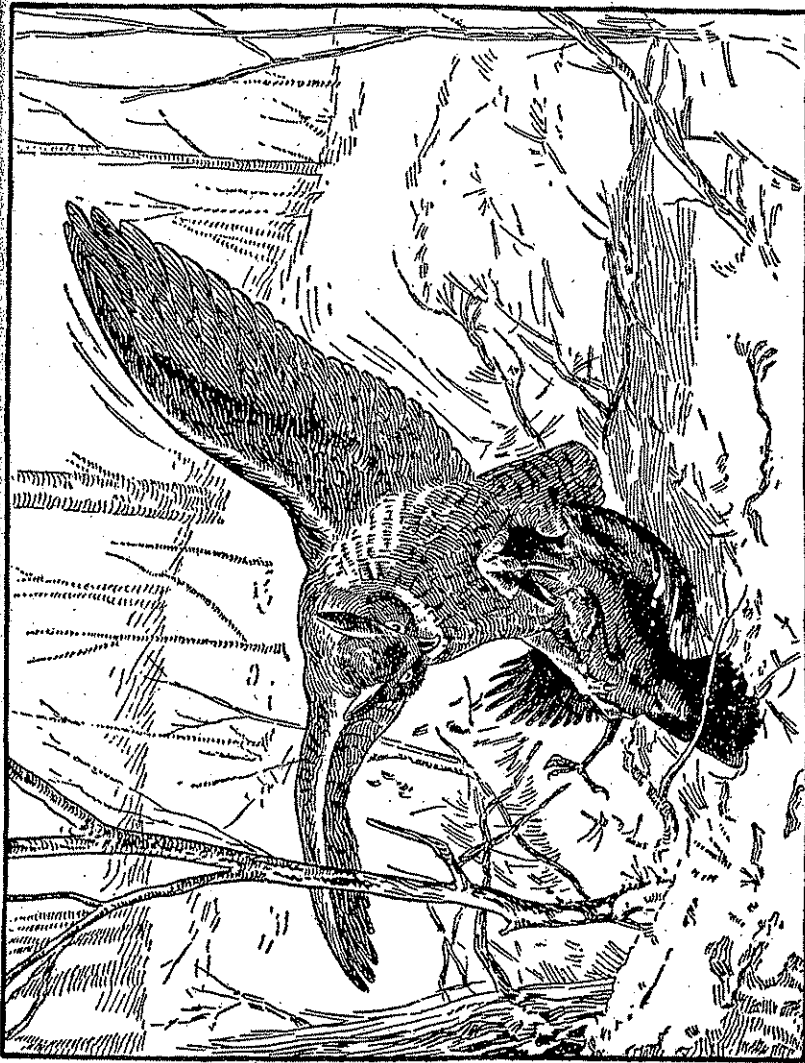
'Descend!' and they all dropped nearly to the ground.

'Forage!' and they alighted and scattered about to feed, while two of the permanent sentries mounted duty—one on a tree to the right, the other on a mound to the far left. A minute or two later Silverspot would cry out, 'A man with a gun!' The sentries repeated the cry and the company flew at once in open order as quickly as possible toward the trees. Once behind these, they formed line again in safety and returned to the home pines.

Sentry duty is not taken in turn by all the crows, but a certain number whose watchfulness has been often proved are the perpetual sentries, and are expected to watch and forage at the same time. Rather hard on them it seems to



The track of the murderer.



The Death of Silverspot.

their numbers are dwindling, and soon they will be seen no more about the old pine-grove in which they and their forefathers had lived and learned for ages.

Silverspot

In 1893 the crows had come as usual to Castle Frank. I was walking in these woods a few days afterward when I chanced upon the track of a rabbit that had been running at full speed over the snow and dodging about among the trees as though pursued. Strange to tell, I could see no track of the pursuer. I followed the trail and presently saw a drop of blood on the snow, and a little farther on found the partly devoured remains of a little brown bunny. What had killed him was a mystery until a careful search showed in the snow a great double-toed track and a beautifully pencilled brown feather. Then all was clear—a horned owl. Half an hour later, in passing again by the place, there, in a tree, within ten feet of the bones of his victim, was the fierce-eyed owl himself. The murderer still hung about the scene of his crime. For once circumstantial evidence had not lied.

Silverspot

But with the morning their courage comes again, and arousing themselves they ransack the woods for a mile around till they find that owl, and if they do not kill him they at least worry him half to death and drive him twenty miles away.

At my approach he gave a guttural "grr-oo" and flew off with low lagging flight to haunt the distant sombre woods. Two days afterward, at dawn, there was a great uproar among the crows. I went out early to see, and found some black feathers drifting over the snow. I followed up the wind in the direction from which they came and soon saw the bloody remains of a crow and the great double-toed track which again told me that the murderer was the owl. All around were signs of struggle, but the fell destroyer was too strong. The poor crow had been dragged from his perch at night, when the darkness had put him at a hopeless disadvantage. I turned over the remains, and by chance unburt the head—then started with an exclamation of sorrow. Alas! It was the head of old Silverspot. His long life of usefulness to his tribe was over—slain at last by the owl that he had taught so many hundreds of young crows to beware of. The old nest on the Sugar Loaf is abandoned now. The crows still come in spring-time to Castle Frank, but without their famous leader

Silverspot

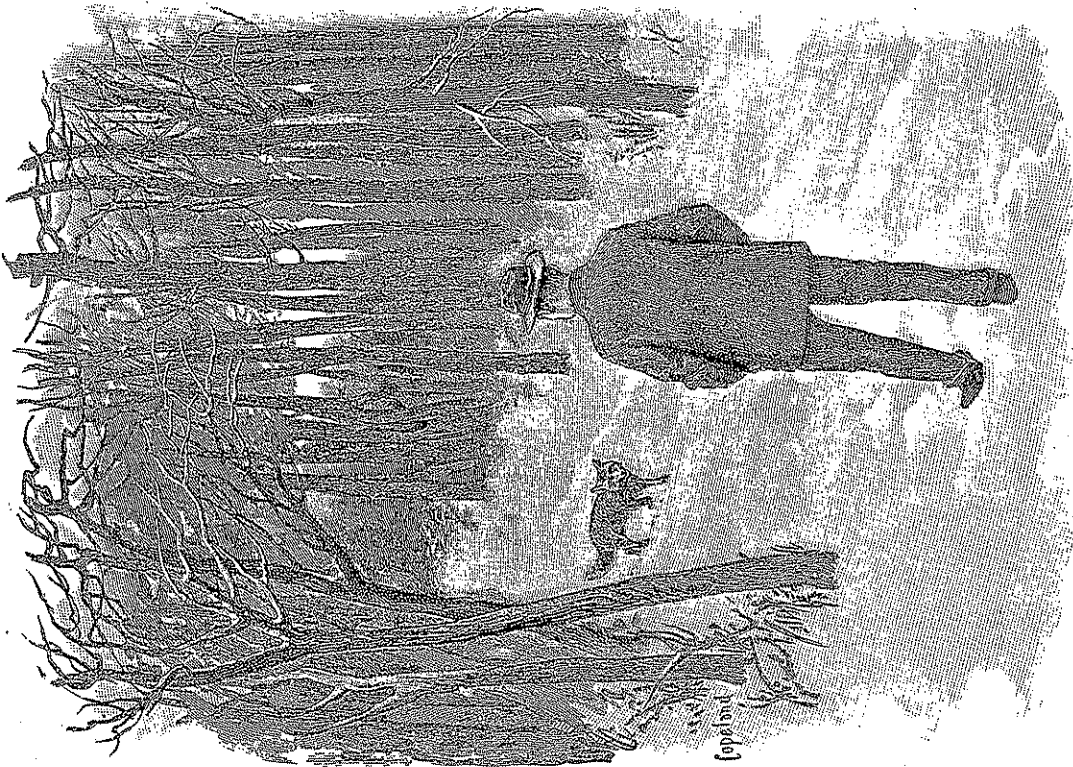
WAYS OF WOOD FOLK

BY
WILLIAM J. LONG

FIRST SERIES



BOSTON, U.S.A.
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1902



PREFACE.

"ALL crows are alike," said a wise man, speaking of politicians. That is quite true—in the dark. By daylight, however, there is as much difference, within and without, in the first two crows one meets as in the first two men or women. I asked a little child once, who was telling me all about her chicken, how she knew her chicken from twenty others just like him in the flock. "How do I know my chicken? I know him by his little face," she said. And sure enough, the face, when you looked at it closely, was different from all other faces.

This is undoubtedly true of all birds and all animals. They recognize each other instantly amid multitudes of their kind; and one who watches them patiently sees quite as many odd ways and individualities among Wood Folk as among other people. No matter, therefore, how well you know the habits of crows or the habits of caribou in general, watch the first one that crosses your path as if he were an entire stranger; open eyes to see and heart to interpret, and you will surely find some new thing, some curious unrecorded way, to give delight to your tramp and bring you home with a new interest.

This individuality of the wild creatures will account, perhaps, for many of these Ways, which can seem no more curious or startling to the reader than to the writer when he first discovered them. They are, almost entirely, the records of personal observation in the woods and fields. Occasionally, when I know my hunter or woodsman well, I have taken his testimony, but never without weighing it carefully, and proving it whenever possible by watching the animal in question for days or weeks till I found for myself that it was all true.

The sketches are taken almost at random from old notebooks and summer journals. About them gather a host of associations, of living-over-again, that have made it a delight to write them; associations of the winter woods, of apple blossoms and nest-building, of New England uplands and wilderness rivers, of camps and canoes, of snowshoes and trout rods, of sunrise on the hills, when one climbed for the eagle's nest, and twilight on the yellow wind-swept beaches, where the surf sobbed far away, and wings twanged like reeds in the wind swooping down to decoys, — all thronging about one, eager to be remembered if not recorded. Among them, most eager, most intense, most frequent of all associations, there is a boy with nerves all a-tingle at the vast sweet mystery that rustled in every wood, following the call of the winds and the birds, or wandering alone where the spirit moved him, who never studied nature consciously, but only loved it, and who found out many of these Ways long ago, guided solely by a boy's instinct.

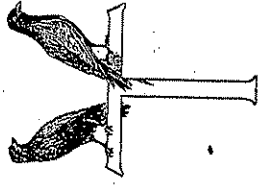
If they speak to other boys, as to fellow explorers in the always new world, if they bring back to older children happy memories of a golden age when nature and man were not quite so far apart, then there will be another pleasure in having written them.

My thanks are due, and are given heartily, to the editors of *The Youth's Companion* for permission to use several sketches that have already appeared, and to Mr. Charles Copeland, the artist, for his care and interest in preparing the illustrations.

WM. J. LONG.

ANDOVER, MASS., June, 1899.

go away. As you find your canoe and paddle back to camp, a ripple made by a beaver's nose follows silently in the shadow of the alders. At the bend of the river where you disappear, the ripple halts a while, like a projecting stub in the current, then turns and goes swiftly back. There is another splash; the builders come out again; a dozen ripples are scattering star reflections all over the pool; while the little wood folk pause a moment to look at the new works curiously, then go their ways, shy, silent, industrious, through the wilderness night.



VII. CROW-WAYS.

HE crow is very much of a rascal—that is, if any creature can be called a rascal for following out natural and rascally inclinations. I first came to this conclusion one early morning, several years ago, as I watched an old crow diligently exploring a fringe of bushes that grew along the wall of a deserted pasture. He had eaten a clutch of thrush's eggs, and carried off three young sparrows to feed his own young, before I found out what he was about. Since then I have surprised him often at the same depredations.

An old farmer has assured me that he has also caught him tormenting his sheep, lighting on their backs and pulling the wool out by the roots to get fleece for lining his nest. This is a much more serious charge than that of pulling up corn, though the latter makes almost every farmer his enemy.

Yet with all his rascality he has many curious and interesting ways. In fact, I hardly know another bird that so well repays a season's study; only one must

be very patient, and put up with frequent disappointments if he would learn much of a crow's peculiarities by personal observation. How shy he is! How cunning and quick to learn wisdom! Yet he is very easily fooled; and some experiences that ought to teach him wisdom he seems to forget within an hour. Almost every time I went shooting, in the old barbarian days before I learned better, I used to get one or two crows from a flock that ranged over my hunting ground by simply hiding among the pines and calling like a young crow. If the flock was within hearing, it was astonishing to hear the loud chorus of *haw-haws*, and to see them come rushing over the same grove where a week before they had been fooled in the same way. Sometimes, indeed, they seemed to remember; and when the pseudo young crow began his racket at the bottom of some thick grove they would collect on a distant pine tree and *haw-haw* in vigorous answer. But curiosity always got the better of them, and they generally compromised by sending over some swift, long-winged old flier, only to see him go tumbling down at the report of a gun; and away they would go, screaming at the top of their voices, and never stopping till they were miles away. Next week they would do exactly the same thing.

Crows, more than any other birds, are fond of excitement and great crowds; the slightest unusual object

furnishes an occasion for an assembly. A wounded bird will create as much stir in a flock of crows as a railroad accident does in a village. But when some prowling old crow discovers an owl sleeping away the sunlight in the top of a great hemlock, his delight and excitement know no bounds. There is a suppressed frenzy in his very call that every crow in the neighborhood understands. *Come! come! everybody come!* he seems to be screaming as he circles over the tree-top; and within two minutes there are more crows gathered about that old hemlock than one would believe existed within miles of the place. I counted over seventy one day, immediately about a tree in which one of them had found an owl; and I think there must have been as many more flying about the outskirts that I could not count.

At such times one can approach very near with a little caution, and attend, as it were, a crow caucus. Though I have attended a great many, I have never been able to find any real cause for the excitement. Those nearest the owl sit about in the trees cawing vociferously; not a crow is silent. Those on the outskirts are flying rapidly about and making, if possible, more noise than the inner ring. The owl meanwhile sits blinking and staring, out of sight in the green top. Every moment two or three crows leave the ring to fly up close and peep in, and then go

screaming back again, hopping about on their perches, cawing at every breath, nodding their heads, striking the branches, and acting for all the world like excited stump speakers.

The din grows louder and louder; fresh voices are coming in every minute; and the owl, wondering in some vague way if he is the cause of it all, flies off to some other tree where he can be quiet and go to sleep. Then, with a great rush and clatter, the crows follow, some swift old scout keeping close to the owl and screaming all the way to guide the whole cawing rabble. When the owl stops they gather round again and go through the same performance more excitedly than before. So it continues till the owl finds some hollow tree and goes in out of sight, leaving them to caw themselves tired; or else he finds some dense pine grove, and doubles about here and there, with that shadowy noiseless flight of his, till he has thrown them off the track. Then he flies into the thickest tree he can find, generally outside the grove where the crows are looking, and sitting close up against the trunk blinks his great yellow eyes and listens to the racket that goes sweeping through the grove, peering curiously into every thick pine, searching everywhere for the lost excitement.

The crows give him up reluctantly. They circle for a few minutes over the grove, rising and falling

with that beautiful, regular motion that seems like the practice drill of all gregarious birds, and generally end by collecting in some tree at a distance and *hawing* about it for hours, till some new excitement calls them elsewhere.

Just why they grow so excited over an owl is an open question. I have never seen them molest him, nor show any tendency other than to stare at him occasionally and make a great noise about it. That they recognize him as a thief and cannibal I have no doubt. But he thives by night when other birds are abed, and as they practise their own thieving by open daylight, it may be that they are denouncing him as an impostor. Or it may be that the owl in his nightly prowlings sometimes snatches a young crow off the roost. The great horned owl would hardly hesitate to eat an old crow if he could catch him napping; and so they grow excited, as all birds do in the presence of their natural enemies. They make much the same kind of a fuss over a hawk, though the latter easily escapes the annoyance by flying swiftly away, or by circling slowly upward to a height so dizzy that the crows dare not follow.

In the early spring I have utilized this habit of the crows in my search for owls' nests. The crows are much more apt to discover its whereabouts than the most careful ornithologist, and they gather about it

very edge of the grove, and peeked through did I see the performer. Out on the end of a long delicate branch, a few feet above the ground, a small crow was clinging, swaying up and down like a bobolink on a cardinal flower, balancing himself gracefully by spreading his wings, and every few minutes giving the strange cracking sound, accompanied by a flirt of his wings and tail as the branch swayed upward. At every repetition the crows *haved* in applause. I watched them fully ten minutes before they saw me and flew away.

Several times since, I have been attracted by unusual sounds, and have surprised a flock of crows which were evidently watching a performance by one of their number. Once it was a deep musical whistle, much like the *too-too-too* of the blue jay, (who is the crow's cousin, for all his bright colors), but deeper and fuller, and without the trill that always marks the blue jay's whistle. Once, in some big woods in Maine, it was a hoarse bark, utterly unlike a bird call, which made me slip heavy shells into my gun and creep forward, expecting some strange beast that I had never before met.

The same love of variety and excitement leads the crow to investigate any unusual sight or sound that catches his attention. Hide anywhere in the woods, and make any queer sound you will—play a jews'-harp,

or pull a devil's fiddle, or just call softly—and first comes a blue jay, all agog to find out all about it. Next a red squirrel steals down and barks just over your head, to make you start if possible. Then, if your eyes are sharp, you will see a crow gliding from thicket to thicket, keeping out of sight as much as possible, but drawing nearer and nearer to investigate the unusual sound. And if he is suspicious or unsatisfied, he will hide and wait patiently for you to come out and show yourself.

Not only is he curious about you, and watches you as you go about the woods, but he watches his neighbors as well. When a fox is started you can often trace his course, far ahead of your dogs, by the crows circling over him and calling *rascal, rascal*, whenever he shows himself. He watches the ducks and plover, the deer and bear; he knows where they are, and what they are doing; and he will go far out of his way to warn them, as well as his own kind, at the approach of danger. When birds nest, or foxes den, or beasts fight in the woods, he is there to see it. When other things fail he will even play jokes, as upon one occasion when I saw a young crow hide in a hole in a pine tree, and for two hours keep a whole flock in a frenzy of excitement by his distressed cawing. He would venture out when they were at a distance, peek all about cautiously to see that no one

saw him, then set up a heart-rending appeal, only to dodge back out of sight when the flock came rushing in with a clamor that was deafening.

Only one of two explanations can account for his action in this case; either he was a young crow who did not appreciate the gravity of crying *wolf, wolf!* when there was no wolf, or else it was a plain game of hide-and-seek. When the crows at length found him they chased him out of sight, either to chastise him, or, as I am inclined now to think, each one sought to catch him for the privilege of being the next to hide.

In fact, whenever one hears a flock of crows *hawking* away in the woods, he may be sure that some excitement is afoot that will well repay his time and patience to investigate.

* * * * *

Since the above article was written, some more curious crow-ways have come to light. Here is one which seems to throw light on the question of their playing games. I found it out one afternoon last September, when a vigorous cawing over in the woods induced me to leave the orchard, where I was picking apples, for the more exciting occupation of spying on my dark neighbors.

The clamor came from an old deserted pasture,

bounded on three sides by pine woods, and on the fourth by half wild fields that straggled away to the dusty road beyond. Once, long ago, there was a farm there; but even the cellars have disappeared, and the crows no longer fear the place.

It was an easy task to creep unobserved through the nearest pine grove, and gain a safe hiding place under some junipers on the edge of the old pasture. The cawing meanwhile was intermittent; at times it broke out in a perfect babel, as if every crow were doing his best to outcaw all the others; again there was silence save for an occasional short note, the *all's well* of the sentinel on guard. The crows are never so busy or so interested that they neglect this precaution.

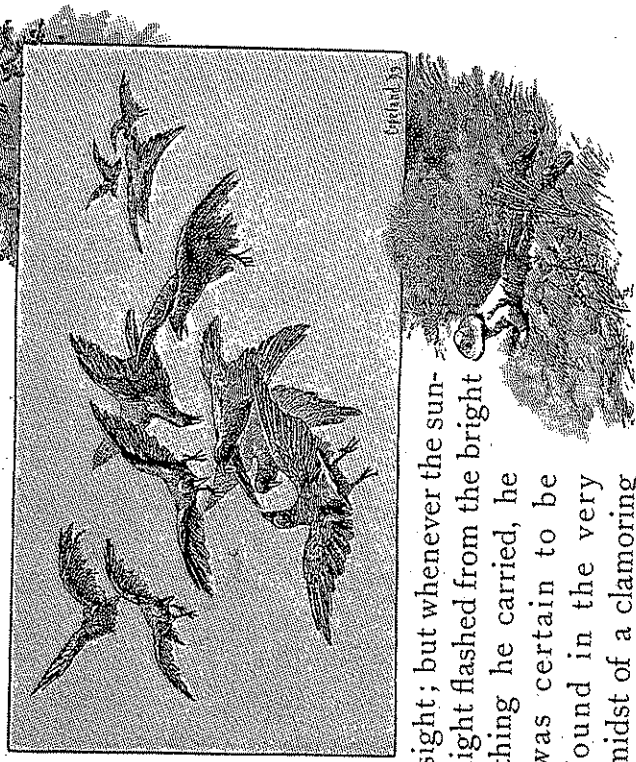
When I reached the junipers, the crows—half a hundred of them—were ranged in the pine tops along one edge of the open. They were quiet enough, save for an occasional scramble for position, evidently waiting for something to happen. Down on my right, on the fourth or open side of the pasture, a solitary old crow was perched in the top of a tall hickory. I might have taken him for a sentry but for a bright object which he held in his beak. It was too far to make out what the object was; but whenever he turned his head it flashed in the sunlight like a bit of glass.

As I watched him curiously he launched himself into the air and came speeding down the center of the field, making for the pines at the opposite end. Instantly every crow was on the wing; they shot out from both sides, many that I had not seen before, all cawing like mad. They rushed upon the old fellow from the hickory, and for a few moments it was impossible to make out anything except a whirling, diving rush of black wings. The din meanwhile was deafening.

Something bright dropped from the excited flock, and a single crow swooped after it; but I was too much interested in the rush to note what became of him. The clamor ceased abruptly. The crows, after a short practice in rising, falling, and wheeling to command, settled in the pines on both sides of the field, where they had been before. And there in the hickory was another crow with the same bright, flashing thing in his beak.

There was a long wait this time, as if for a breathing spell. Then the solitary crow came skimming down the field again without warning. The flock surrounded him on the moment, with the evident intention of hindering his flight as much as possible. They flapped their wings in his face; they zig-zagged in front of him; they attempted to light on his back. In vain he twisted and dodged and dropped like

a stone. Wherever he turned he found fluttering wings to oppose his flight. The first object of the game was apparent: he was trying to reach the goal of pines opposite the hickory, and the others were trying to prevent it. Again and again the leader was lost to



sight; but whenever the sunlight flashed from the bright thing he carried, he was certain to be found in the very midst of a clamoring crowd. Then the second object was clear: the crows were trying to confuse him and make him drop the talisman.

They circled rapidly down the field and back again, near the watcher. Suddenly the bright thing dropped, reaching the ground before it was discovered. Three or four crows swooped upon it, and a lively scrimmage began for its possession. In the midst of the struggle a small crow shot under the contestants, and before they knew what was up he was scurrying away to the hickory with the coveted trinket held as high as he could carry it, as if in triumph at his sharp trick.

The flock settled slowly into the pines again with much *hawing*. There was evidently a question whether the play ought to be allowed or not. Everybody had something to say about it; and there was no end of objection. At last it was settled good-naturedly, and they took places to watch till the new leader should give them opportunity for another chase.

There was no doubt left in the watcher's mind by this time as to what the crows were doing. They were just playing a game, like so many schoolboys, enjoying to the full the long bright hours of the September afternoon. Did they find the bright object as they crossed the pasture on the way from Farmer B's corn-field, and the game so suggest itself? Or was the game first suggested, and the talisman brought afterwards? Every crow has a secret storehouse, where he hides every bright thing he finds. Sometimes it

is a crevice in the rocks under moss and ferns; sometimes the splintered end of a broken branch; sometimes a deserted owl's nest in a hollow tree; often a crotch in a big pine, covered carefully by brown needles; but wherever it is, it is full of bright things—glass, and china, and beads, and tin, and an old spoon, and a silvered buckle—and nobody but the crow himself knows how to find it. Did some crow fetch his best trinket for the occasion, or was this a special thing for games, and kept by the flock where any crow could get it?

These were some of the interesting things that were puzzling the watcher when he noticed that the hickory was empty. A flash over against the dark green revealed the leader. There he was, stealing along in the shadow, trying to reach the goal before they saw him. A derisive *haze* announced his discovery. Then the fun began again, as noisy, as confusing, as thoroughly enjoyable as ever.

When the bright object dropped this time, curiosity to get possession of it was stronger than my interest in the game. Besides, the apples were waiting. I jumped up, scattering the crows in wild confusion; but as they streamed away I fancied that there was still more of the excitement of play than of alarm in their flight and clamor.

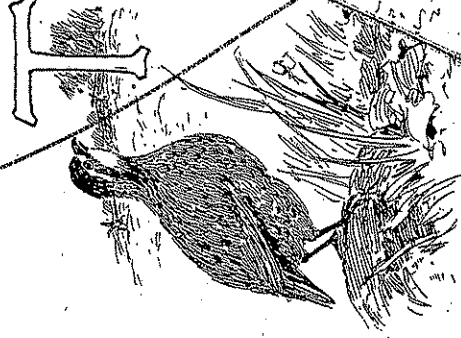
The bright object which the leader carried proved

to be the handle of a glass cup or pitcher. A fragment of the vessel itself had broken off with the handle, so that the ring was complete. Altogether it was just the thing for the purpose — bright, and not too heavy, and most convenient for a crow to seize and carry. Once well gripped, it would take a good deal of worrying to make him drop it.

Who first was "it," as children say in games? Was it a special privilege of the crow who first found the talisman, or do the crows have some way of counting out for the first leader? There is a school-house down that same old dusty road. Sometimes, when at play there, I used to notice the crows stealing silently from tree to tree in the woods beyond, watching our play, I have no doubt, as I now had watched theirs. Only we have grown older, and forgotten how to play; and they are as much boys as ever. Did they learn their game from watching us at tag, I wonder? And do they know coram, and leave-stocks, and prisoners' base, and bull-in-the-ring as well? One could easily believe their wise little black heads to be capable of any imitation, especially if one had watched them a few times, at work and play, when they had no idea they were being spied upon.

VIII. ONE TOUCH OF NATURE.

THE cheery whistle of a quail recalls to most New England people a vision of breezy upland pastures and a motley brown bird calling melodiously from the topmost stanting rail of an old sheep-fence. Farmers say he foretells the weather, calling, *More-wet — much-more-wet!*



Boys say he only proclaims his name, *Bob White! I'm Bob White!* But whether he prognosticates or introduces himself, his voice is always a welcome one. Those who know the call listen with pleasure, and speedily come to love the bird that makes it.

Bob White has another call, more beautiful than his boyish whistle, which comparatively few have heard. It is a soft liquid yodeling, which the male bird uses to call the scattered flock together. One who walks

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THE SCAVENGERS



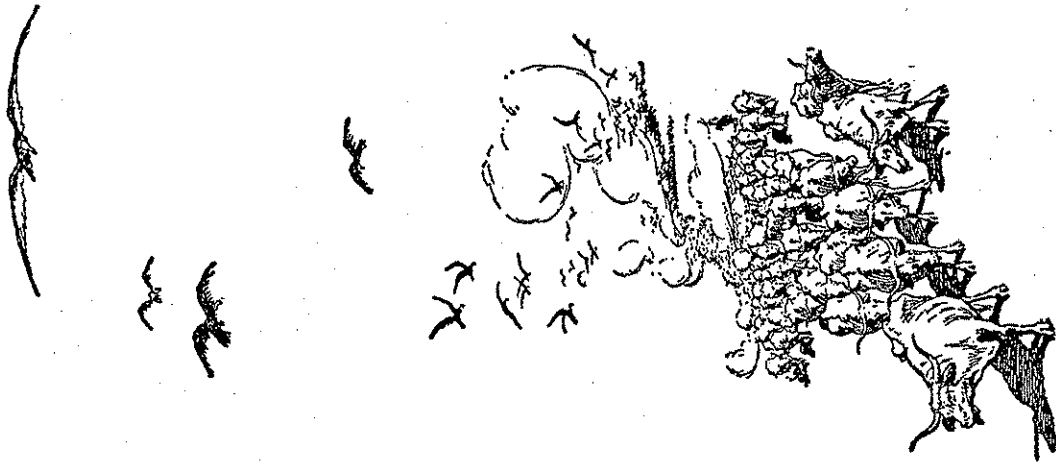
Fifty-seven buzzards, one on each of fifty-seven fence posts at the rancho El Tejon, on a mirage-breeding September morning, sat solemnly while the white tilted travelers' vans lumbered down the Canada de los Uvas. After three hours they had only clapped their wings, or exchanged posts. The season's end in the vast dim valley of the San Joaquin is palpitatingly hot, and the air breathes like cotton wool. Through it all the buzzards sit on the fences and low hummocks, with wings spread fanwise for air. There is no end to them, and they smell to heaven. Their heads droop, and all their communication is a rare, horrid croak.

The increase of wild creatures is in proportion to the things they feed upon: the more carrion the more buzzards. The end of the third successive dry year bred them beyond belief. The first year quail mated sparingly; the second year the wild oats matured no seed; the third, cattle died in their tracks with their heads

towards the stopped watercourses. And that year the scavengers were as black as the plague all across the mesa and up the treeless, tumbled hills. On clear days they betook themselves to the upper air, where they hung motionless for hours. That year there were vultures among them, distinguished by the white patches under the wings. All their offensiveness notwithstanding, they have a stately flight. They must also have what pass for good qualities among themselves, for they are social, not to say clannish.

It is a very squalid tragedy,—that of the dying brutes and the scavenger birds. Death by starvation is slow. The heavy-headed, rack-boned cattle totter in the fruitless trails; they stand for long, patient intervals; they lie down and do not rise. There is fear in their eyes when they are first stricken, but afterward only intolerable weariness. I suppose the dumb creatures know nearly as much of death as do their betters, who have only the more imagination. Their even-breathing submission after the first agony is their tribute to its inevitableness. It needs a nice discrimination to say which of the basket-ribbed cattle is likeliest to afford the next meal, but the scavengers make few mistakes. One stoops to the quarry and the flock follows.

Cattle once down may be days in dying. They stretch out their necks along the ground, and roll up their slow eyes at longer intervals. The buzzards have all the time, and no beak is dropped or talon struck until the breath is wholly passed. It is doubtless the economy of nature to have the scavengers by to clean up the carrion, but a wolf at the throat would be a shorter agony than the long stalking and sometime perchings of these loathsome watchers. Suppose now it were a man in this long-drawn, hungrily spied upon distress! When Timmie O'Shea was lost on Armogosa



Flats for three days without water, Long Tom Basset found him, not by any trail, but by making straight away for the points where he saw buzzards stooping. He could hear the beat of their wings, Tom said, and trod on their shadows, but O'Shea was past recalling what he thought about things after the second day. My friend Ewan told me, among other things, when he came back from San Juan Hill, that not all the carnage of battle turned his bowels as the sight of slant black wings rising flockwise before the burial squad.

There are three kinds of noises buzzards make,—it is impossible to call them notes,—raucous and elemental. There is a short croak of alarm, and the same syllable in a modified tone to serve all the purposes of ordinary conversation. The old birds make a kind of throaty chuckling to their young, but if they have any love song I have not heard it. The young yawp in the nest a little, with more breath than noise. It is seldom one finds a buzzard's nest, seldom that grown-ups find a nest of any sort; it is only children to whom these things happen by right. But by making a business of it one may come upon them in wide, quiet cañons, or on the lookouts of lonely, table-topped mountains, three or four together, in the tops of stubby trees or on rotten cliffs well open to the sky.

It is probable that the buzzard is gregarious, but it seems unlikely that the small number of young noted at any time that every female incubates each year. The young birds are easily distinguished by their size when feeding, and high up in air by the worn primaries of the older birds. It is when the young go out of the nest on their first foraging that the parents, full of a crass and simple pride, make their indescribable chucklings of gobbling, gluttonous delight. The little

ones would be amusing as they tug and tussle, if one could forget what it is they feed upon.

One never comes any nearer to the vulture's nest or nestlings than hearsay. They keep to the southerly Sierras, and are bold enough, it seems, to do killing on their own account when no carrion is at hand. They dog the shepherd from camp to camp, the hunter home from the hill, and will even carry away offal from under his hand.



The vulture merits respect for his bigness and for his bandit airs, but he is a sombre bird, with none of the buzzard's frank satisfaction in his offensiveness.

The least objectionable of the inland scavengers is the raven, frequenter of the desert ranges, the same called locally "carrion crow." He is handsomer and has such an air. He is nice in his habits and is said to have likable traits. A tame one in a Shoshone camp was the butt of much sport and enjoyed it. He could all but talk and was another with the children, but an arrant thief. The raven will eat most things that come his way,—eggs and young of ground-nesting birds, seeds even, lizards and grasshoppers, which he catches cleverly; and whatever he is about, let a coyote trot never so softly by, the raven flaps up and after; for whatever the coyote can pull down or nose out is meat also for the carrion crow.

And never a coyote comes out of his lair for killing, in the country of the carrion crows, but looks up first to see where they may be gathering. It is a sufficient occupation for a windy morning, on the lineless, level mesa, to watch the pair of them eying each other fur-tively, with a tolerable assumption of unconcern, but no doubt with a certain amount of good understanding about it. Once at Red Rock, in a year of green pasture, which is a bad time for the scavengers, we saw two buzzards, five ravens, and a coyote feeding on the same carrion, and only the coyote seemed ashamed of the company.

Probably we never fully credit the interdependence of wild creatures, and their cognizance of the affairs of their own kind. When the five coyotes that range the Tejon from Pasteria to Tunawai planned a relay race to bring down an antelope strayed from the band, beside myself to watch, an eagle swung down from Mt.

Pinos, buzzards materialized out of invisible ether, and hawks came trooping like small boys to a street fight. Rabbits sat up in the chaparral and cocked their ears, feeling themselves quite safe for the once as the hunt swung near them. Nothing happens in the deep wood that the blue jays are not all agog to tell. The hawk follows the badger, the coyote the carrion crow, and from their aerial stations the buzzards watch each other. What would be worth knowing is how much of their neighbor's affairs the new generations learn for themselves, and how much they are taught of their elders.

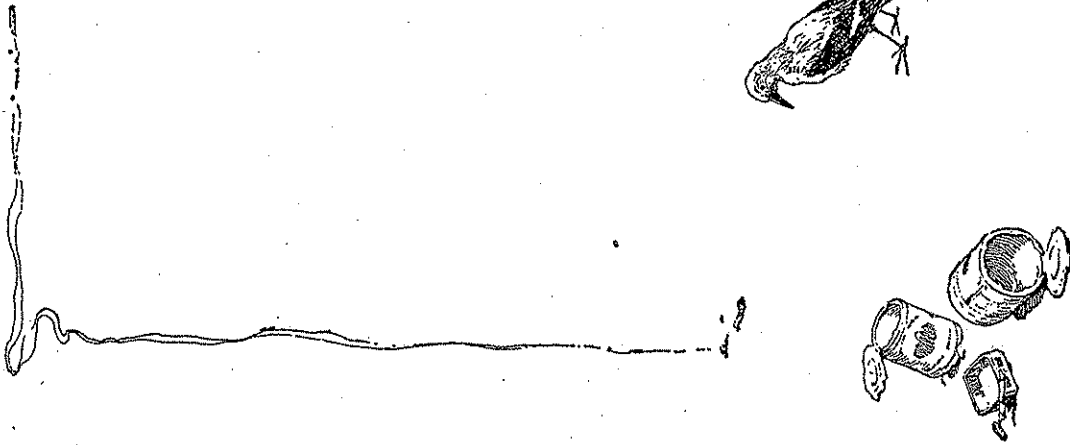
So wide is the range of the scavengers that it is never safe to say, eyewitness to the contrary, that there are few or many in such a place. Where the carrion is, there will the buzzards be gathered together, and in three days' journey you will not sight another one. The way up from Mojave to Red Butte is all desertness, affording no pasture and scarcely a rill of water. In a year of little rain in the south, flocks and herds were driven to the number of thousands along this road to the perennial pastures of the high ranges. It is a long, slow trail, ankle deep in bitter dust that gets up in the slow wind and moves along the backs of the crawling cattle. In the worst of times one in three will pine and fall out by the way. In the defiles of Red Rock, the sheep piled up a stinking lane; it was the sun smiting by day. To these shambles came buzzards, vultures, and coyotes from all the country round, so that on the Tejon, the Ceriso, and the Little Antelope there were not scavengers enough to keep the country clean. All that summer the dead mummified in the open or dropped slowly back to earth in the quagmires of the bitter springs. Meanwhile from Red Rock to Coyote

Holes, and from Coyote Holes to Haiwai the scavengers gorged and gorged.

The coyote is not a scavenger by choice, preferring his own kill, but being on the whole a lazy dog, is apt to fall into carrion eating because it is easier. The red fox and bobcat, a little pressed by hunger, will eat of any other animal's kill, but will not ordinarily touch what dies of itself, and are exceedingly shy of food that has been man-handled.

Very clean and handsome, quite belying his relationship in appearance, is Clark's crow, that scavenger and plunderer of mountain camps. It is permissible to call him by his common name, "Camp Robber;" he has earned it. Not content with refuse, he pecks open meal sacks, filches whole potatoes, is a gormand for bacon, drills holes in packing cases, and is daunted by nothing short of tin. All the while he does not neglect to vituperate the chipmunks and sparrows that whisk off crumbs of comfort from under the camper's feet. The Camp Robber's gray coat, black and white barred wings, and slender bill, with certain tricks of perching, accuse him of attempts to pass himself off among woodpeckers; but his behavior is all crow. He frequents the higher pine belts, and has a noisy strident call like a jay's, and how clean he and the frisk-tailed chipmunks keep the camp! No crumb or paring or bit of eggshell goes amiss.

High as the camp may be, so it is not above timberline, it is not too high for the coyote, the bobcat, or the wolf. It is the complaint of the ordinary camper that the woods are too still, depleted of wild life. But what dead body of wild thing, or neglected game untouched by its kind, do you find? And put out offal away from camp over night, and look next day at the foot tracks where it lay.



Man is a great blunderer going about in the woods, and there is no other except the bear makes so much noise. Being so well warned beforehand, it is a very stupid animal, or a very bold one, that cannot keep safely hid. The cunningest hunter is hunted in turn, and what he leaves of his kill is meat for some other. That is the economy of nature, but with it all there is not sufficient account taken of the works of man. There is no scavenger that eats tin cans, and no wild thing leaves a like disfigurement on the forest floor.

THE POCKET HUNTER

I remember very well when I first met him. Walking in the evening glow to spy the marriages of the white gillias, I sniffed the unmistakable odor of burning sage. It is a smell that carries far and indicates usually the nearness of a campoodie, but on the level mesa nothing taller showed than Diana's sage. Over the tops of it, beginning to dusk under a young white moon, trailed a wavering ghost of smoke, and at the end of it I came upon the Pocket Hunter making a dry camp in the friendly scrub. He sat tailorwise in the sand, with his coffee-pot on the coals, his supper ready to hand in the frying-pan, and himself in a mood for talk. His pack burros in hobbles strayed off to hunt for a wetter mouthful than the sage afforded, and gave him no concern.

We came upon him often after that, threading the windy passes, or by water-holes in the desert hills, and got to know much of his way of life. He was a small, bowed man, with a face and manner and speech of no character at all, as if he had that faculty of small hunted things of taking on the protective color of his surroundings. His clothes were of no fashion that I could remember, except that they bore liberal markings of pot black, and he had a curious fashion of go-

ing about with his mouth open, which gave him a vacant look until you came near enough to perceive him busy about an endless hummed, wordless tune. He traveled far and took a long time to it, but the simplicity of his kitchen arrangements was elemental. A pot for beans, a coffee-pot, a frying-pan, a tin to mix bread in—he fed the burros in this when there was need—with these he had been half round our western world and back. He explained to me very early in our acquaintance what was good to take to the hills for food: nothing sticky, for that “dirtied the pots;” nothing with “juice” to it, for that would not pack to advantage; and nothing likely to ferment. He used no gun, but he would set snares by the water-holes for quail and doves, and in the trout country he carried a line. Burros he kept, one or two according to his pack, for this chief excellence, that they would eat potato parings and firewood. He had owned a horse in the foothill country, but when he came to the desert with no forage but mesquite, he found himself under

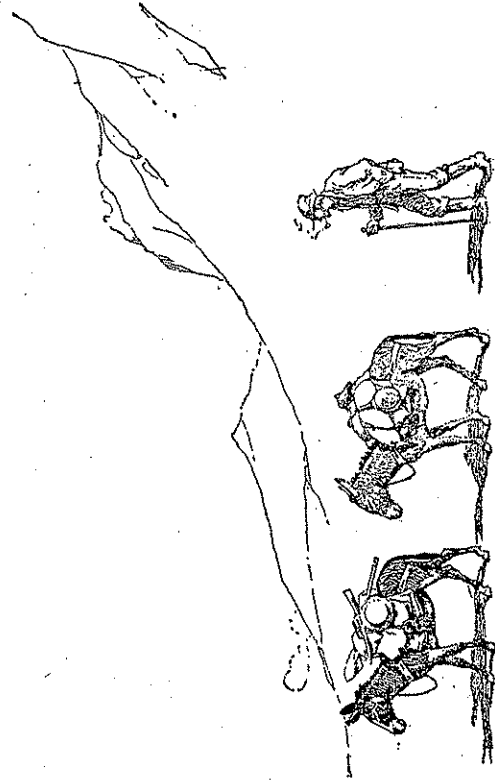


the necessity of picking the beans from the briars, a labor that drove him to the use of pack animals to whom thorns were a relish.

I suppose no man becomes a pocket hunter by first intention. He must be born with the faculty, and along comes the occasion, like the tap on the test tube that induces crystallization. My friend had been several things of no moment until he struck a thousand-dollar pocket in the Lee District and came into his vocation. A pocket, you must know, is a small body of rich ore occurring by itself, or in a vein of poorer stuff. Nearly every mineral ledge contains such, if only one has the luck to hit upon them without too much labor. The sensible thing for a man to do who has found a good pocket is to buy himself into business and keep away from the hills. The logical thing is to set out looking for another one. My friend the Pocket Hunter had been looking twenty years. His working outfit was a shovel, a pick, a gold pan which he kept cleaner than his plate, and a pocket magnifier. When he came to a watercourse he would pan out the gravel of its bed for “colors,” and under the glass determine if they had come from far or near, and so spying he would work up the stream until he found where the drift of the gold-bearing outcrop fanned out into the creek; then up the side of the cañon till he came to the proper vein. I think he said the best indication of small pockets was an iron stain, but I could never get the run of miner’s talk enough to feel instructed for pocket hunting. He had another method in the waterless hills, where he would work in and out of blind gullies and all windings of the manifold strata that appeared not to have cooled since they had been heaved up. His itinerary began with the east slope of the Sierras of the Snows, where that range swings across to meet the

coast hills, and all up that slope to the Truckee River country, where the long cold forbade his progress north. Then he worked back down one or another of the nearly parallel ranges that lie out desertward, and so down to the sink of the Mojave River, burrowing to oblivion in the sand,—a big mysterious land, a lonely, inhospitable land, beautiful, terrible. But he came to no harm in it; the land tolerated him as it might a gopher or a badger. Of all its inhabitants it has the least concern for man.

There are many strange sorts of humans bred in a mining country, each sort despising the queeresses of the other, but of them all I found the Pocket Hunter most acceptable for his clean, companionable talk. There was more color to his reminiscences than the faded sandy old miners "kyoteing," that is, tunneling like a coyote (kyote in the vernacular) in the core of a lonesome hill. Such a one has found, perhaps, a body of tolerable ore in a poor lead,—remember that I can never be depended on to get the terms right,—and fol-



lowed it into the heart of country rock to no profit, hoping, burrowing, and hoping. These men go harmlessly mad in time, believing themselves just behind the wall of fortune—most likable and simple men, for whom it is well to do any kindly thing that occurs to you except lend them money. I have known "grub stakers" too, those persuasive sinners to whom you make allowances of flour and pork and coffee in consideration of the ledges they are about to find; but none of these proved so much worth while as the Pocket Hunter. He wanted nothing of you and maintained a cheerful preference for his own way of life. It was an excellent way if you had the constitution for it. The Pocket Hunter had gotten to that point where he knew no bad weather, and all places were equally happy so long as they were out of doors. I do not know just how long it takes to become saturated with the elements so that one takes no account of them. Myself can never get past the glow and exhilaration of a storm, the writhle of long dust-heavy winds, the play of live thunder on the rocks, nor past the keen fret of fatigue when the storm outlasts physical endurance. But prospectors and Indians get a kind of a weather shell that remains on the body until death.

The Pocket Hunter had seen destruction by the violence of nature and the violence of men, and felt himself in the grip of an All-wisdom that killed men or spared them as seemed for their good; but of death by sickness he knew nothing except that he believed he should never suffer it. He had been in Grape-vine Cañon the year of storms that changed the whole front of the mountain. All day he had come down under the wing of the storm, hoping to win past it, but finding it traveling with him until night. It kept on after that, he supposed, a steady downpour, but could not

with certainty say, being securely deep in sleep. But the weather instinct does not sleep. In the night the heavens behind the hill dissolved in rain, and the roar of the storm was borne in and mixed with his dreaming, so that it moved him, still asleep, to get up and out of the path of it. What finally woke him was the crash of pine logs as they went down before the unbridled flood, and the swirl of foam that lashed him where he clung in the tangle of scrub while the wall of water went by. It went on against the cabin of Bill Gerry and laid Bill stripped and broken on a sand bar at the mouth of the Grape-vine, seven miles away. There, when the sun was up and the wrath of the rain spent, the Pocket Hunter found and buried him; but he never laid his own escape at any door but the unintelligible favor of the Powers.

The journeyings of the Pocket Hunter led him often into that mysterious country beyond Hot Creek where a hidden force works mischief, mole-like, under the crust of the earth. Whatever agency is at work in that neighborhood, and it is popularly supposed to be the devil, it changes means and direction without time or season. It creeps up whole hillsides with insidious heat, unguessed until one notes the pine woods dying at the top, and having scorched out a good block of timber returns to steam and spout in caked, forgotten crevices of years before. It will break up sometimes blue-hot and bubbling, in the midst of a clear creek, or make a sucking, scalding quicksand at the ford. These outbreaks had the kind of morbid interest for the Pocket Hunter that a house of unsavory reputation has in a respectable neighborhood, but I always found the accounts he brought me more interesting than his explanations, which were compounded of fag ends of miner's talk and superstition. He was a perfect gossip of the

woods, this Pocket Hunter, and when I could get him away from "leads" and "strikes" and "contacts," full of fascinating small talk about the ebb and flood of creeks, the piñon crop on Black Mountain, and the wolves of Mesquite Valley. I suppose he never knew how much he depended for the necessary sense of home and companionship on the beasts and trees, meeting and finding them in their wonted places,—the bear that used to come down Pine Creek in the spring, pawing out trout from the shelters of sod banks, the juniper at Lone Tree Spring, and the quail at Paddy Jack's.

There is a place on Waban, south of White Mountain, where flat, wind-tilted cedars make low tents and coves of shade and shelter, where the wild sheep winter in the snow. Woodcutters and prospectors had brought me word of that, but the Pocket Hunter was accessory to the fact. About the opening of winter, when one looks for sudden big storms, he had attempted a crossing by the nearest path, beginning the ascent at noon. It grew cold, the snow came on thick and blinding, and wiped out the trail in a white smudge; the storm drift blew in and cut off landmarks, the early dark obscured the rising drifts. According to the Pocket Hunter's account, he knew where he was, but couldn't exactly say. Three days before he had been in the west arm of Death Valley on a short water allowance, ankle-deep in shifty sand; now he was on the rise of Waban, knee-deep in sodden snow, and in both cases he did the only allowable thing—he walked on. That is the only thing to do in a snowstorm in any case. It might have been the creature instinct, which in his way of life had room to grow, that led him to the cedar shelter; at any rate he found it about four hours after dark, and heard the heavy breathing of the

flock. He said that if he thought at all at this juncture he must have thought that he had stumbled on a storm-belated shepherd with his silly sheep; but in fact he took no note of anything but the warmth of packed fleeces, and snuggled in between them dead with sleep. If the flock stirred in the night he stirred drowsily to keep close and let the storm go by. That was all until morning woke him shining on a white world. Then the very soul of him shook to see the wild sheep of God stand up about him, nodding their great horns beneath the cedar roof, looking out on the wonder of the snow. They had moved a little away from him with the coming of the light, but paid him no more heed. The light broadened and the white pavilions of the snow swam in the heavenly blueness of the sea from which they rose. The cloud drift scattered and broke billowing in the cañons. The leader stamped lightly on the litter to put the flock in motion, suddenly they took the drifts in those long light leaps that are nearest to flight, down and away on the slopes of Waban. Think of that to happen to a Pocket Hunter! But though he had fallen on many a wished-for hap, he was curiously inapt at getting the truth about beasts in general. He believed in the venom of toads, and charms for snake bites, and—for this I could never forgive him—had all the miner's prejudices against my friend the coyote. Thief, sneak, and son of a thief were the friendliest words he had for this little gray dog of the wilderness.

Of course with so much seeking he came occasionally upon pockets of more or less value, otherwise he could not have kept up his way of life; but he had as much luck in missing great ledges as in finding small ones. He had been all over the Tonopah country, and brought away float without happening upon anything

that gave promise of what that district was to become in a few years. He claimed to have chipped bits off the very outcrop of the California Rand, without finding it worth while to bring away, but none of these things put him out of countenance.

It was once in roving weather, when we found him shifting pack on a steep trail, that I observed certain of his belongings done up in green canvas bags, the veritable "green bag" of English novels. It seemed so incongruous a reminder in this untenanted West that

I dropped down beside the trail overlooking the vast dim valley, to hear about the green canvas. He had gotten it, he said, in London years before, and that was the first I had known of his having been abroad. It was after one of his "big strikes" that he had made the Grand Tour, and had brought nothing away from it but the green canvas bags, which he conceived would fit his needs, and an ambition. This last was nothing less than to strike it rich and set himself up among the eminently bourgeois of London. It seemed that the situation of the wealthy English middle class, with just enough gentility above to aspire to, and sufficient smaller fry to bully and patronize, appealed to his imagination, though of course he did not put it so crudely as that.

It was no news to me then, two or three years after, to learn that he had taken ten thousand dollars from an abandoned claim, just the sort of luck to have pleased him, and gone to London to spend it. The land seemed not to miss him any more than it had minded him, but I missed him and could not forget the trick of expecting him in least likely situations. Therefore it was with a pricking sense of the familiar that I followed a twilight trail of smoke, a year or two later, to the swale of a dripping spring, and came upon a man by the fire with a coffee-pot and frying-pan. I was not surprised to find it was the Pocket Hunter. No man can be stronger than his destiny.

BIRCH BROWSINGS

A John Burroughs Reader

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Bill McKibben

1992



PENGUIN BOOKS

WILD LIFE ABOUT MY CABIN

Friends have often asked me why I turned my back upon the Hudson and retreated into the wilderness. Well, I do not call it a retreat; I call it a withdrawal, a retirement, the taking up of a new position to renew the attack, it may be, more vigorously than ever. It is not always easy to give reasons. There are reasons within reasons, and often no reasons at all that we are aware of.

To a countryman like myself, not born to a great river or an extensive water-view, these things, I think, grow wearisome after a time. He becomes surfeited with a beauty that is alien to him. He longs for something more homely, private, and secluded. Scenery may be too fine or too grand and imposing for one's daily and hourly view. It tires after a while. It demands a mood that comes to you only at intervals. Hence it is never wise to build your house on the most ambitious spot in the landscape. Rather seek out a more humble and secluded nook or corner, which you can fill and warm with your domestic and home instincts and affections. In some things the half is often more satisfying than the whole. A glimpse of the Hudson River

between hills or through openings in the trees wears better with me than a long expanse of it constantly spread out before me. One day I had an errand to a farmhouse nestled in a little valley or basin at the foot of a mountain. The earth put out protecting arms all about it,—a low hill with an orchard on one side, a sloping pasture on another, and the mountain, with the skirts of its mantling forests, close at hand in the rear. How my heart warmed toward it! I had been so long perched high upon the banks of a great river, in sight of all the world, exposed to every wind that blows, with a horizon-line that sweeps over half a county, that, quite unconsciously to myself, I was pining for a nook to sit down in. I was hungry for the private and the circumscribed; I knew it when I saw this sheltered farmstead. I had long been restless and dissatisfied,—a vague kind of homesickness; now I knew the remedy. Hence when, not long afterward, I was offered a tract of wild land, barely a mile from home, that contained a secluded nook and a few acres of level, fertile land shut off from the vain and noisy world of railroads, steamboats, and yachts by a wooded, precipitous mountain, I quickly closed the bargain, and built me a rustic house there, which I call "Slabsides," because its outer walls are covered with slabs. I might have given it a prettier name, but not one more fit, or more in keeping with the mood that brought me thither. A slab is the first cut from the log, and the bark goes with it. It is like the first cut from the loaf, which we call the crust, and which the children reject, but which we older ones often prefer. I wanted to take a fresh cut of life,—something that had the bark on, or, if you please, that was like a well-browned and hardened crust. After three years I am satisfied with the experiment. Life has a

different flavor here. It is reduced to simpler terms; its complex equations all disappear. The exact value of x may still elude me, but I can press it hard; I have shorn it of many of its disguises and entanglements.

When I went into the woods the robins went with me, or rather they followed close. As soon as a space of ground was cleared and the garden planted, they were on hand to pick up the worms and insects, and to superintend the planting of the cherry-trees: three pairs the first summer, and more than double that number the second. In the third, their early morning chorus was almost as marked a feature as it is about the old farm homesteads. The robin is no hermit: he likes company; he likes the busy scenes of the farm and the village; he likes to carol to listening ears, and to build his nest as near your dwelling as he can. Only at rare intervals do I find a real sylvan robin, one that nests in the woods, usually by still waters, remote from human habitation. In such places his morning and evening carol is a welcome surprise to the fisherman or camper-out. It is like a dooryard flower found blooming in the wilderness. With the robins came the song sparrows and social sparrows, or chippies, also. The latter nested in the bushes near my cabin, and the song sparrows in the bank above the ditch that drains my land. I notice that Chippy finds just as many horsehairs to weave into her nest here in my horseless domain as she does when she builds in the open country. Her partiality for the long hairs from the manes and tails of horses and cattle is so great that she is often known as the hair-bird. What would she do in a country where there were neither cows nor horses? Yet these hairs are not good nesting-material. They are slippery, refractory things, and occasionally cause a tragedy

in the nest by getting looped around the legs or the neck of the young or of the parent bird. They probably give a smooth finish to the interior, dear to the heart of Chippy.

The first year of my cabin life a pair of robins attempted to build a nest upon the round timber that forms the plate under my porch roof. But it was a poor place to build in. It took nearly a week's time and caused the birds a great waste of labor to find this out. The coarse material they brought for the foundation would not bed well upon the rounded surface of the timber, and every vagrant breeze that came along swept it off. My porch was kept littered with twigs and weed-stalks for days, till finally the birds abandoned the undertaking. The next season a wiser or more experienced pair made the attempt again, and succeeded. They placed the nest against the rafter where it joins the plate; they used mud from the start to level up with and to hold the first twigs and straws, and had soon completed a firm, shapely structure. When the young were about ready to fly, it was interesting to note that there was apparently an older and a younger, as in most families. One bird was more advanced than any of the others. Had the parent birds intentionally stimulated it with extra quantities of food, so as to be able to launch their offspring into the world one at a time? At any rate, one of the birds was ready to leave the nest a day and a half before any of the others. I happened to be looking at it when the first impulse to get outside the nest seemed to seize it. Its parents were encouraging it with calls and assurances from some rocks a few yards away. It answered their calls in vigorous, strident tones. Then it climbed over the edge of the nest upon the plate, took a few steps forward, then a few more, till it was a yard from the nest and near the end of the timber, and could look off into free space. Its parents

apparently shouted, "Come on!" But its courage was not quite equal to the leap; it looked around, and seeing how far it was from home, scampered back to the nest, and climbed into it like a frightened child. It had made its first journey into the world, but the home tie had brought it quickly back. A few hours afterward it journeyed to the end of the plate again, and then turned and rushed back. The third time its heart was braver, its wings stronger, and leaping into the air with a shout, it flew easily to some rocks a dozen or more yards away. Each of the young in succession, at intervals of nearly a day, left the nest in this manner. There would be the first journey of a few feet along the plate, the first sudden panic at being so far from home, the rush back, a second and perhaps a third attempt, and then the irrevocable leap into the air, and a clamorous flight to a near-by bush or rock. Young birds never go back when they have once taken flight. The first free flap of the wing severs forever the ties that bind them to home.

The chickadees we have always with us. They are like the evergreens among the trees and plants. Winter has no terrors for them. They are properly wood-birds, but the groves and orchards know them also. Did they come near my cabin for better protection, or did they chance to find a little cavity in a tree there that suited them? Branch-builders and ground-builders are easily accommodated, but the chickadee must find a cavity, and a small one at that. The woodpeckers make a cavity when a suitable trunk or branch is found, but the chickadee, with its small, sharp beak, rarely does so; it usually smooths and deepens one already formed. This a pair did a few yards from my cabin. The opening was into the heart of a little sassafras, about four feet from the ground. Day after day the birds took turns in deepening and enlarging the cavity: a

soft, gentle hammering for a few moments in the heart of the little tree, and then the appearance of the worker at the opening, with the chips in his, or her, beak. They changed off every little while, one working while the other gathered food. Absolute equality of the sexes, both in plumage and in duties, seems to prevail among these birds, as among a few other species. During the preparations for housekeeping the birds were hourly seen and heard, but as soon as the first egg was laid, all this was changed. They suddenly became very shy and quiet. Had it not been for the new egg that was added each day, one would have concluded that they had abandoned the place. There was a precious secret now that must be well kept. After incubation began, it was only by watching that I could get a glimpse of one of the birds as it came quickly to feed or to relieve the other.

One day a lot of Vassar girls came to visit me, and I led them out to the little sassafras to see the chickadees' nest. The sitting bird kept her place as head after head, with its nodding plumes and millinery, appeared above the opening to her chamber, and a pair of inquisitive eyes peered down upon her. But I saw that she was getting ready to play her little trick to frighten them away. Presently I heard a faint explosion at the bottom of the cavity, when the peeping girl jerked her head quickly back, with the exclamation, "Why, it spit at me!" The trick of the bird on such occasions is apparently to draw in its breath till its form perceptibly swells, and then give forth a quick, explosive sound like an escaping jet of steam. One involuntarily closes his eyes and jerks back his head. The girls, to their great amusement, provoked the bird into this pretty outburst of her impatience two or three times. But as the ruse failed of

its effect, the bird did not keep it up, but let the laughing faces gaze till they were satisfied.

There is only one other bird known to me that resorts to the same trick to scare away intruders, and that is the great crested flycatcher. As your head appears before the entrance to the cavity in which the mother bird is sitting, a sudden burst of escaping steam seems directed at your face, and your backward movement leaves the way open for the bird to escape, which she quickly does.

The chickadee is a prolific bird, laying from six to eight eggs, and it seems to have few natural enemies. I think it is seldom molested by squirrels or black snakes or weasels or crows or owls. The entrance to the nest is usually so small that none of these creatures can come at them. Yet the number of chickadees in any given territory seems small. What keeps them in check? Probably the rigors of winter and a limited food-supply. The ant-eaters, fruit-eaters, and seed-eaters mostly migrate. Our all-the-year-round birds, like the chickadees, woodpeckers, jays, and nuthatches, live mostly on nuts and the eggs and larvæ of tree-insects, and hence their larder is a restricted one; hence, also, these birds rear only one brood in a season. A hairy woodpecker passed the winter in the woods near me by subsisting on a certain small white grub which he found in the bark of some dead hemlock-trees. He "worked" these trees,—four of them,—as the slang is, "for all they were 'worth.'" The grub was under the outer shell of bark, and the bird literally skinned the trees in getting at his favorite morsel. He worked from the top downward, hammering or prying off this shell, and leaving the trunk of the tree with a red, denuded look. Bushels of the fragments of the bark covered the ground

at the foot of the tree in spring, and the trunk looked as if it had been flayed,—as it had.

The big chimney of my cabin of course attracted the chimney, swifts, and as it was not used in summer, two pairs built their nests in it, and we had the muffled thunder of their wings at all hours of the day and night. One night, when one of the broods was nearly fledged, the nest that held them fell down into the fireplace. Such a din of screeching and chattering as they instantly set up! Neither my dog nor I could sleep. They yelled in chorus, stopping at the end of every half-minute as if upon signal. Now they were all screeching at the top of their voices, then a sudden, dead silence ensued. Then the din began again, to terminate at the instant as before. If they had been long practicing together, they could not have succeeded better. I never before heard the cry of birds so accurately timed. After a while I got up and put them back up the chimney, and stopped up the throat of the flue with newspapers. The next day one of the parent birds, in bringing food to them, came down the chimney with such force that it passed through the papers and brought up in the fireplace. On capturing it I saw that its throat was distended with food as a chipmunk's cheek with corn, or a boy's pocket with chestnuts. I opened its mandibles, when it ejected a wad of insects as large as a bean. Most of them were much macerated, but there were two houseflies yet alive and but little the worse for their close confinement. They stretched themselves, and walked about upon my hand, enjoying a breath of fresh air once more. It was nearly two hours before the swift again ventured into the chimney with food.

These birds do not perch, nor alight upon buildings or the ground. They are apparently upon the wing all day. They

outride the storms. I have in my mind a cheering picture of three of them I saw facing a heavy thunder-shower one afternoon. The wind was blowing a gale, the clouds were rolling in black, portentous billows out of the west, the peals of thunder were shaking the heavens, and the big drops were just beginning to come down, when, on looking up, I saw three swifts high in air, working their way slowly, straight into the teeth of the storm. They were not hurried or disturbed; they held themselves firmly and steadily; indeed, they were fairly at anchor in the air till the rage of the elements should have subsided. I do not know that any other of our land birds outride the storms in this way.

The phoebe-birds also soon found me out in my retreat, and a pair of them deliberated a long while about building on a little shelf in one of my gables. But, much to my regret, they finally decided in favor of a niche in the face of a ledge of rocks not far from my spring. The place was well screened by bushes and well guarded against the approach of snakes or four-footed prowlers, and the birds prospered well and reared two broods. They have now occupied the same nest three years in succession. This is unusual: Phoebe prefers a new nest each season, but in this case there is no room for another, and, the site being a choice one, she slightly repairs and refurnishes her nest each spring, leaving the new houses for her more ambitious neighbors.

Of wood-warblers my territory affords many specimens. One spring a solitary Nashville warbler lingered near my cabin for a week. I heard his bright, ringing song at all hours of the day. The next spring there were two or more, and they nested in my pea-bushes. The black and white creeping warblers are perhaps the most abundant. A pair of them built a nest in a

steep moss and lichen covered hillside, beside a high gray rock. Our path to Julian's Rock led just above it. It was an ideal spot and an ideal nest, but it came to grief. Some small creature sucked the eggs. On removing the nest I found an earth-stained egg beneath it. Evidently the egg had ripened before its receptacle was ready, and the mother, for good luck, had placed it in the foundation.

One day, as I sat at my table writing, I had a call from the worm-eating warbler. It came into the open door, flitted about inquisitively, and then, startled by the apparition at the table, dashed against the window-pane and fell down stunned. I picked it up, and it lay with closed eyes panting in my hand. I carried it into the open air. In a moment or two it opened its eyes, looked about, and then closed them and fell to panting again. Soon it looked up at me once more and about the room, and seemed to say: "Where am I? What has happened to me?" Presently the panting ceased, the bird's breathing became more normal, it gradually got its bearings, and, at a motion of my hand, darted away. This is an abundant warbler in my vicinity, and nested this year near by. I have discovered that it has an air-song—the song of ecstasy—like that of the oven-bird. I had long suspected it, as I frequently heard a fine burst of melody that was new to me. One June day I was fortunate enough to see the bird delivering its song in the air above the low trees. As with the oven-bird, its favorite hour is the early twilight, though I hear the song occasionally at other hours. The bird darts upward fifty feet or more, about half the height that the oven-bird attains, and gives forth a series of rapid, ringing musical notes, which quickly glide into the long, sparrow-like trill that forms its ordinary workaday song. While this part is being uttered, the singer is on its downward flight

into the woods. The flight-song of the oven-bird is louder and more striking, and is not so shy and furtive a performance. The latter I hear many times every June twilight, and I frequently see the singer reach his climax a hundred feet or more in the air, and then mark his arrow-like flight downward. I have heard this song also in the middle of the night near my cabin. At such times it stands out on the stillness like a bursting rocket on the background of the night.

One or two mornings in April, at a very early hour, I am quite sure to hear the hermit thrush singing in the bushes near my window. How quickly I am transported to the Delectable Mountains and to the mossy solitudes of the northern woods! The winter wren also pauses briefly in his northern journey, and surprises and delights my ear with his sudden lyrical burst of melody. Such a dapper, fidgety, gesticulating, bobbing-up-and-down-and-out-and-in little bird, and yet full of such sweet, wild melody! To get him at his best, one needs to hear him in a dim, northern hemlock wood, where his voice reverberates as in a great hall; just as one should hear the veery in a beech and birch wood, beside a purling trout brook, when the evening shades are falling. It then becomes to you the voice of some particular spirit of the place and the hour. The veery does not inhabit the woods immediately about my cabin, but in the summer twilight he frequently comes up from the valley below and sings along the borders of my territory. How welcome his simple flute-like strain! The wood thrush is the leading chorister in the woods about me. He does not voice the wildness, but seems to give a touch of something half rural, half urban,—such is the power of association in bird-songs. In the evening twilight I often sit on the highest point of the rocky rim of the great granite bowl that holds my three acres of prairie

soil, and see the shadows deepen, and listen to the bird voices that rise up from the forest below me. The songs of many wood thrushes make a sort of golden warp in the texture of sounds that is being woven about me. Now the flight-song of the oven-bird holds the ear, then the fainter one of the worm-eating warbler lures it. The carol of the robin, the vesper hymn of the tanager, the flute of the veery, are all on the air. Finally, as the shadows deepen and the stars begin to come out, the whip-poor-will suddenly strikes up. What a rude intrusion upon the serenity and harmony of the hour! A cry without music, insistent, reiterated, loud, penetrating, and yet the ear welcomes it also; the night and the solitude are so vast that they can stand it; and when, an hour later, as the night enters into full possession, the bird comes and serenades me under my window or upon my doorstep, my heart warms toward it. Its cry is a love-call, and there is something of the ardor and persistence of love in it, and when the female responds, and comes and hovers near, there is an interchange of subdued, caressing tones between the two birds that it is a delight to hear. During my first summer here one bird used to strike up every night from a high ledge of rocks in front of my door. At just such a moment in the twilight he would begin, the first to break the stillness. Then the others would follow, till the solitude was vocal with their calls. They are rarely heard later than ten o'clock. Then at daybreak they take up the tale again, whipping poor Will till one pities him. One April morning between three and four o'clock, hearing one strike up near my window, I began counting its calls. My neighbor had told me he had heard one call over two hundred times without a break, which seemed to me a big story. But I have a much bigger one to tell. This bird actually laid upon the back of poor Will one

thousand and eighty-eight blows, with only a barely perceptible pause here and there, as if to catch its breath. Then it stopped about half a minute and began again, uttering this time three hundred and ninety calls, when it paused, flew a little farther away, took up the tale once more, and continued till I fell asleep.

By day the whip-poor-will apparently sits motionless upon the ground. A few times in my walks through the woods I have started one up from almost under my feet. On such occasions the bird's movements suggest those of a bat; its wings make no noise, and it wavers about in an uncertain manner, and quickly drops to the ground again. One June day we flushed an old one with her two young, but there was no indecision or hesitation in the manner of the mother bird this time. The young were more than half fledged, and they scampered away a few yards and suddenly squatted upon the ground, where their protective coloring rendered them almost invisible. Then the anxious parent put forth all her arts to absorb our attention and lure us away from her offspring. She flitted before us from side to side, with spread wings and tail, now falling upon the ground, where she would remain a moment as if quite disabled, then perching upon an old stump or low branch with drooping, quivering wings, and imploring us by every gesture to take her and spare her young. My companion had his camera with him, but the bird would not remain long enough in one position for him to get her picture. The whip-poor-will builds no nest, but lays her two blunt, speckled eggs upon the dry leaves, where the plumage of the sitting bird blends perfectly with her surroundings. The eye, only a few feet away, has to search long and carefully to make her out. Every gray and brown and black tint of dry leaf and lichen, and bit of bark or broken twig, is

copied in her plumage. In a day or two, after the young are hatched, the mother begins to move about with them through the woods.

When I want the wild of a little different flavor and quality from that immediately about my cabin, I go a mile through the woods to Black Creek, here called the Shattega, and put my canoe into a long, smooth, silent stretch of water that winds through a heavily timbered marsh till it leads into Black Pond, an oval sheet of water half a mile or more across. Here I get the moist, spongy, tranquil, luxurious side of Nature. Here she stands or sits knee-deep in water, and wreathes herself with pond-lilies in summer, and bedecks herself with scarlet maples in autumn. She is an Indian maiden, dark, subtle, dreaming, with glances now and then that thrill the wild blood in one's veins. The Shattega here is a stream without banks and with a just perceptible current. It is a waterway through a timbered marsh. The level floor of the woods ends in an irregular line where the level surface of the water begins. As one glides along in his boat, he sees various rank aquatic growths slowly waving in the shadowy depths beneath him. The larger trees on each side unite their branches above his head, so that at times he seems to be entering an arboreal cave out of which glides the stream. In the more open places the woods mirror themselves in the glassy surface till one seems floating between two worlds, clouds and sky and trees below him matching those around and above him. A bird flits from shore to shore, and one sees it duplicated against the sky in the under-world. What vistas open! What banks of drooping foliage, what grain and arch of gnarled branches, lure the eye as one drifts or silently paddles along! The stream has absorbed the shadows so long that it is itself like a liquid shadow. Its

bed is lined with various dark vegetable growths, as with the skin of some huge, shaggy animal, the fur of which slowly stirs in the languid current. I go here in early spring, after the ice has broken up, to get a glimpse of the first wild ducks and to play the sportsman without a gun. I am sure I would not exchange the quiet surprise and pleasure I feel, as, on rounding some point or curve in the stream, two or more ducks spring suddenly out from some little cove or indentation in the shore, and with an alarum *quack, quack*, launch into the air and quickly gain the free spaces above the treetops, for the satisfaction of the gunner who sees their dead bodies fall before his murderous fire. He has only a dead duck, which, the chances are, he will not find very toothsome at this season, while I have a live duck with whistling wings cleaving the air northward, where, in some lake or river of Maine or Canada, in late summer, I may meet him again with his brood. It is so easy, too, to bag the game with your eye, while your gun may leave you only a feather or two floating upon the water. The duck has wit, and its wit is as quick as, or quicker than, the sportsman's gun. One day in spring I saw a gunner cut down a duck when it had gained an altitude of thirty or forty feet above the stream. At the report it stopped suddenly, turned a somersault, and fell with a splash into the water. It fell like a brick, and disappeared like one; only a feather and a few bubbles marked the spot where it struck. Had it sunk? No; it had dived. It was probably winged, and in the moment it occupied in falling to the water it had decided what to do. It would go beneath the hunter, since it could not escape above him; it could fly in the water with only one wing, with its feet to aid it. The gunner instantly set up a diligent search in all directions, up and down along the shores, peering long and

intently into the depths, thrusting his oar into the weeds and driftwood at the edge of the water, but no duck or sign of duck could he find. It was as if the wounded bird had taken to the mimic heaven that looked so sunny and real down there, and gone on to Canada by that route. What astonished me was that the duck should have kept its presence of mind under such trying circumstances, and not have lost a fraction of a second of time in deciding on a course of action. The duck, I am convinced, has more sagacity than any other of our commoner fowl.

The day I see the first ducks I am pretty sure to come upon the first flock of blackbirds, —rusty grackles, —resting awhile on their northward journey amid the reeds, alders, and spice-bush beside the stream. They allow me to approach till I can see their yellow eyes and the brilliant iris on the necks and heads of the males. Many of them are vocal, and their united voices make a volume of sound that is analogous to a bundle of slivers. Sputtering, splintering, rasping, rending, their notes chafe and excite the ear. They suggest thorns and briars of sound, and yet are most welcome. What voice that rises from our woods or beside our waters in April is not tempered or attuned to the ear? Just as I like to chew the crinkleroot and the twigs of the spice-bush at this time, or at any time, for that matter, so I like to treat my ear to these more aspirated and astringent bird voices. Is it Thoreau who says they are like pepper and salt to this sense? In all the blackbirds we hear the voice of April not yet quite articulate; there is a suggestion of catarrh and influenza still in the air-passages. I should, perhaps, except the red-shouldered starling, whose clear and liquid *gur-ga-lee* or *o-ka-lee*, above the full water-courses, makes a different impression. The cowbird also has

a clear note, but it seems to be wrenched or pumped up with much effort.

In May I go to Black Creek to hear the warblers and the water-thrushes. It is the only locality where I have ever heard the two water-thrushes, or accentors, singing at the same time,—the New York and the large-billed. The latter is much more abundant and much the finer songster. How he does make these watery solitudes ring with his sudden, brilliant burst of song! But the more northern species pleases the ear also with his quieter and less hurried strain. I drift in my boat and let the ear attend to the one, then to the other, while the eye takes note of their quick, nervous movements and darting flight. The smaller species probably does not nest along this stream, but the large-billed breeds here abundantly. The last nest I found was in the roots of an upturned tree, with the water immediately beneath it. I had asked a neighboring farm-boy if he knew of any birds' nests.

"Yes," he said; and he named over the nests of robins, highholes, sparrows, and others, and then that of a "tip-up."

At this last I pricked up my ears, so to speak. I had not seen a tip-up's nest in many a day. "Where?" I inquired.

"In the roots of a tree in the woods," said Charley.

"Not the nest of the 'tip-up,' or sandpiper," said I. "It builds on the ground in the open country near streams."

"Anyhow, it tipped," replied the boy.

He directed me to the spot, and I found, as I expected to find, the nest of the water-thrush. When the Vassar girls came again, I conducted them to the spot, and they took turns in walking a small tree trunk above the water, and gazing upon a nest brimming with the downy backs of young birds.

When I am listening to the water-thrushes, I am also noting

with both eye and ear the warblers and vireos. There comes a week in May when the speckled Canada warblers are in the ascendant. They feed in the low bushes near the water's edge, and are very brisk and animated in voice and movement. The eye easily notes their slate-blue backs and yellow breasts with their broad band of black spots, and the ear quickly discriminates their not less marked and emphatic song.

In late summer I go to the Shattega, and to the lake out of which it flows, for white pond-lilies, and to feast my eye on the masses of purple loosestrife and the more brilliant but more hidden and retired cardinal-flower that bloom upon its banks. One cannot praise the pond-lily; his best words mar it, like the insects that eat its petals: but he can contemplate it as it opens in the morning sun and distills such perfume, such purity, such snow of petal and such gold of anther, from the dark water and still darker ooze. How feminine it seems beside its coarser and more robust congeners; how shy, how pliant, how fine in texture and star-like in form!

The loosestrife is a foreign plant, but it has made itself thoroughly at home here, and its masses of royal purple make the woods look civil and festive. The cardinal burns with a more intense fire, and fairly lights up the little dark nooks where it glasses itself in the still water. One must pause and look at it. Its intensity, its pure scarlet, the dark background upon which it is projected, its image in the still darker water, and its general air of retirement and seclusion, all arrest and delight the eye. It is a heart-throb of color on the bosom of the dark solitude.

The rarest and wildest animal that my neighborhood boasts of is the otter. Every winter we see the tracks of one or more

of them upon the snow along Black Creek. But the eye that has seen the animal itself in recent years I cannot find. It probably makes its excursions along the creek by night. Follow its track—as large as that of a fair-sized dog—over the ice, and you will find that it ends at every open pool and rapid, and begins again upon the ice beyond. Sometimes it makes little excursions up the bank, its body often dragging in the snow like a log. My son followed the track one day far up the mountain-side, where the absence of the snow caused him to lose it. I like to think of so wild and shy a creature holding its own within sound of the locomotive's whistle.

The fox passes my door in winter, and probably in summer too, as do also the possum and the coon. The latter tears down my sweet corn in the garden, and the rabbit eats off my raspberry-bushes and nibbles my first strawberries, while the woodchucks eat my celery and beans and peas. Chipmunks carry off the corn I put out for the chickens, and weasels eat the chickens themselves.

Many times during the season I have in my solitude a visit from a bald eagle. There is a dead tree near the summit, where he often perches, and which we call the "old eagle-tree." It is a pine, killed years ago by a thunderbolt,—the bolt of Jove,—and now the bird of Jove hovers about it or sits upon it. I have little doubt that what attracted me to this spot attracts him,—the seclusion, the savageness, the elemental grandeur. Sometimes, as I look out of my window early in the morning, I see the eagle upon his perch, preening his plumage, or waiting for the rising sun to gild the mountain-tops. When the smoke begins to rise from my chimney, or he sees me going to the spring for water, he concludes it is time for him to be off. But

he need not fear the crack of the rifle here; nothing more deadly than field-glasses shall be pointed at him while I am about. Often in the course of the day I see him circling above my domain, or winging his way toward the mountains. His home is apparently in the Shawangunk Range, twenty or more miles distant, and I fancy he stops or lingers above me on his way to the river. The days on which I see him are not quite the same as the other days. I think my thoughts soar a little higher all the rest of the morning: I have had a visit from a messenger of Jove. The lift or range of those great wings has passed into my thought. I once heard a collector get up in a scientific body and tell how many eggs of the bald eagle he had clutched that season, how many from this nest, how many from that, and how one of the eagles had departed itself after he had killed its mate. I felt ashamed for him. He had only proved himself a superior human weasel. The man with the rifle and the man with the collector's craze are fast reducing the number of eagles in the country. Twenty years ago I used to see a dozen or more along the river in the spring when the ice was breaking up, where I now see only one or two, or none at all. In the present case, what would it profit me could I find and plunder my eagle's nest, or strip his skin from his dead carcass? Should I know him better? I do not want to know him that way. I want rather to feel the inspiration of his presence and noble bearing. I want my interest and sympathy to go with him in his continual voyaging up and down, and in his long, elevated flights to and from his eyrie upon the remote, solitary cliffs. He draws great lines across the sky; he sees the forests like a carpet beneath him, he sees the hills and valleys as folds and wrinkles in a many-colored tapestry; he sees the river as a silver belt

connecting remote horizons. We climb mountain-peaks to get a glimpse of the spectacle that is hourly spread out beneath him. Dignity, elevation, repose, are his. I would have my thoughts take as wide a sweep. I would be as far removed from the petty cares and turmoils of this noisy and blustering world.

tree that fell as our steamer passed near the shore in Alaskan waters, or when the campers in the forest heard a tree fall in the stillness of the night. In both cases the tree's hour had come; the balance of forces was suddenly broken by the yielding of some small particle in the woody tissues of the tree, and down it came. In all such cases there must be a moment of time when the upholding and down-pulling forces are just balanced; then the yielding of one grain more gives the victory to gravity. The slow minute changes in the tree, and in the stone wall, that precede their downfall, we do not see or hear; the sudden culmination and collapse alone arrest our attention. An earthquake is doubtless the result of the sudden release of forces that have been in stress and strain for years or ages; some point at last gives way, and the earth trembles or the mountains fall.

It is the slow insensible changes in the equipoise of the elements about us that, in the course of long periods of time, put a new face upon the aspect of the earth. Rapid and noisy changes over large areas, which may have occurred during the geologic ages, we do not now see except in the case of an earthquake. It is the ceaseless activity, both chemical and physical, in the bodies about us, of which we take no note, that transforms the world. Atom by atom the face of the im- mobile rocks changes. The terrible demonstrative forces, such as electric discharges during a storm, which seem competent to level mountains or blot out landscapes, usually make but slight impression upon the fields and hills.

In the ordinary course of nature, the great beneficent changes come slowly and silently. The noisy changes, for the most part, mean violence and disruption. The roar of storms and tornadoes, the explosions of volcanoes, the crash of the

THE STILL SMALL VOICE

One summer day, while I was walking along the country road on the farm where I was born, a section of the stone wall opposite me, and not more than three or four yards distant, suddenly fell down. Amid the general stillness and immobility about me, the effect was quite startling. The question at once arose in my mind as to just what happened to that bit of stone wall at that particular moment to cause it to fall. Maybe the slight vibration imparted to the ground by my tread caused the minute shifting of forces that brought it down. But the time was ripe; a long, slow, silent process of decay and disintegration, or a shifting of the points of bearing amid the fragments of stone by the action of the weather, culminated at that instant, and the wall fell. It was the sudden summing-up of half a century or more of atomic changes in the material of the wall. A grain or two of sand yielded to the pressure of long years, and gravity did the rest. It was as when the keystone of an arch crumbles or weakens to the last particle, and the arch suddenly collapses.

The same thing happened in the case of the large spruce-

thunder, are the result of a sudden break in the equipoise of the elements; from a condition of comparative repose and silence they become fearfully swift and audible. The still small voice is the voice of life and growth and perpetuity. In the stillness of a bright summer day what work is being accomplished! what processes are being consummated! When the tornado comes, how quickly much of it may be brought to naught! In the history of a nation it is the same. The terrible war that is now devastating Europe is the tornado that comes in the peace and fruitful repose of a summer's day. As living nature in time recovers from the destructive effects of the mad warring of the inorganic elements, so the nations will eventually recover from the blight and waste of this war. But the gains and the benefits can never offset the losses and the agony. The discipline and agony of war only fit a people for more war. If war is to be the business of mankind, then the more of it we have the better; if there is no true growth or expansion for a people, save through blood and fire, then let the blood and fire come to all of us, the more the better. The German gospel of war, so assiduously preached and so heroically practiced in our day, is based upon the conviction that there is no true growth for a nation except by the sword, that the still small voice of love and good will must give place to the brazen trumpet that sounds the onset of hostile and destroying legions.

Are the arts of peace seductive, and do they hasten the mortal ripening of a people's character? Must the ploughshares now be forged into swords and the swords used to spill our neighbors' blood? The current gospel of war is the gospel of hate and reprisal, of broken treaties and burned cities, of murdered women and children, and devastated homes.

What a noise politics makes in the world, our politics

especially! But some silent thinker in his study, or some inventor in his laboratory, is starting currents that will make or unmake politics for generations to come. How noiseless is the light, yet what power dwells in the sunbeams—mechanical power at one end of the spectrum, in the red and infra-red rays, and chemical power at the other or violet and ultra-violet end! It is the mechanical forces—the winds, the rains, the movements of ponderable bodies—that fill the world with noise; the chemical changes that disintegrate the rocks and set the currents of life going are silent. The great loom in which is woven all the living textures that clothe the world with verdure and people it with animated forms makes no sound. Think of the still small voice of radio-activity—so still and small that only molecular science is aware of it, yet physicists believe it to be the mainspring of the universe.

The vast ice-engine that we call a glacier is almost as silent as the slumbering rocks, and, to all but the eye of science, nearly as immobile, save where it discharges into the sea. It is noisy in its dying, but in the height of its power it is as still as the falling snow of which it is made. Yet give it time enough, and it scoops out the valleys and grinds down the mountains and turns the courses of rivers, or makes new ones.

We split the rocks and level the hills with our powder and dynamite and fill the world with noise; but behold the vast cleavage of the rocks which the slow, noiseless forces of sun and frost bring about! In the Shawangunk Mountains one may see enormous masses of conglomerate that have been split down from the main range, showing as clean a cleavage over vast surfaces as the quarryman can produce on small blocks with his drills and wedges. One has to pause and speculate on the character of the forces that achieved such results and left no

mark of sudden violence behind. The forces that cleft them asunder were the noiseless sunbeams. The unequal stress and strain imparted by varying temperatures clove the mountains from top to bottom as with a stroke of the earthquake's hammer. In and about Yosemite Valley one sees granite blocks of the size of houses and churches split in two where they lie in their beds, as if it had been done in their sleep and without awakening them. This silent quarrying and reducing of the rocks never ceases to surprise one. Amid the petrified forests of Arizona one marvels to see the stone trunks of the huge trees lying about in yard lengths as squarely and cleanly severed as if done with a saw. Assault them with sledge and bar and you may reduce them to irregular fragments, but you cannot divide the blocks neatly and regularly as time has done it.

The unknown, the inaudible forces that make for good in every state and community—the gentle word, the kind act, the forgiving look, the quiet demeanor, the silent thinkers and workers, the cheerful and unwearied toilers, the scholar in his study, the scientist in his laboratory—how much more we owe to these things than to the clamorous and discordant voices of the world of politics and the newspaper! Art, literature, philosophy, all speak with the still small voice. How much more potent the voice that speaks out of a great solitude and reverence than the noisy, acrimonious, and disputatious voice! Strong conviction and firm resolution are usually chary of words. Depth of feeling and parsimony of expression go well together.

The mills of the gods upon the earth's surface grind exceeding slow, and exceeding still. They are grinding up the rocks everywhere—pulverizing the granite, the limestone, the sandstone, the basalt, between the upper and nether millstones

of air and water to make the soil, but we hear no sound and mark no change; only in geologic time are the results recorded. In still waters we get the rich deposits that add to the fat of the land, and in peaceful, untroubled times is humanity enriched, and the foundations are laid upon which the permanent institutions of a nation are built.

We all know what can be said in favor of turmoil, agitation, war; we all know, as Goethe said, that a man comes to know himself, not in thought, but in action; and the same is true of a nation. Equally do we know the value of repose, and the slow, silent activities both in the soul of man and in the processes of nature. The most potent and beneficent forces are stillest. The strength of a sentence is not in its adjectives, but in its verbs and nouns, and the strength of men and of nations is in their calm, sane, meditative moments. In a time of noise and hurry and materialism like ours, the gospel of the still small voice is always seasonable.